

# GAME ON, HOLLYWOOD!

*Essays on the Intersection of  
Video Games and Cinema*



by  
John Papazian  
Joseph Michael Sommers





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*Edited by* GRETCHEN PAPAZIAN *and*  
JOSEPH MICHAEL SOMMERS



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers  
*Jefferson, North Carolina, and London*

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Game on, Hollywood! : essays on the intersection of video games and cinema / edited by Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7864-7114-0

softcover : acid free paper (∞)

1. Motion pictures and video games. 2. Film adaptations — History and criticism. 3. Video games — Authorship.  
4. Convergence (Telecommunication) I. Papazian, Gretchen, 1968– — editor of compilation. II. Sommers, Joseph Michael, 1976– — editor of compilation.

PN1995.9.V46G37 2013

791.43'656—dc23

2012051432

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING DATA ARE AVAILABLE

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On the cover: Mary Elizabeth Winstead as Ramona Flowers in *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* (Universal/Photofest); background (Hemera/Thinkstock)

Manufactured in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers

Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640

[www.mcfarlandpub.com](http://www.mcfarlandpub.com)

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

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By the time these words find their audience, Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph* will have likely come and gone from your local cinema multiplex. Children and adults alike will have played and beaten and replayed the simultaneously-released video game based on the motion picture. The film may, by now, even be available in multiple formats for home viewing. And most likely, if Netflix has anything to say about it, the movie and the video game will be able to be watched and played on the same gaming platform. Perhaps at the same time. What a marvelous world we live in.

By the time this book finds its audience, *Wreck-It Ralph* will also have faced and impressed (or possibly disappointed and have been panned by) critics and audiences. As of this writing, though, advanced word of its existence has only begun to circulate to the general population. A trailer has been released, an even longer extended trailer has been shown to tearful eyes (of joy!) at San Diego's Annual ComicCon, and more Twitter announcements, Facebook postings, Wikipedia pages, and blog postings than one can shake a Wii nunchuk at have come to pass. To say that there is buzz surrounding this little movie celebrating video games and complimentary video game celebrating the movie celebrating video games by a company *cum* multi-media conglomerate that has been doing this type of cross-platforming for almost the length of its existence is the very definition of understatement. The palpable excitement about this film that will place *Super Mario Bros.*' Bowser alongside *Mortal Kombat*'s Kano alongside ghosts from *Pac-Man* and Coily the Snake from *Q-Bert* (not to mention alongside the title character) is enough to make adults who grew up with those earlier video game characters and children who grew up with the newer video game characters come together in a movie theater, perhaps for the first time, as equals about a concept so complex, yet so simple, that somewhat ought to write a book about it.

So we did.

Not so much about *Wreck-It Ralph*. No matter how much we tried to



persuade Disney to let us see an advanced print of their motion picture in an effort to do “research” (If you can’t actually see us air quoting right now, as those quotation marks don’t quite do justice to the giddiness we feel towards the film, then you’re simply not trying hard enough.), they were not prepared to release their film to a pair of wide-eyed academics, looking more like anxious children, who were claiming to do field work for an upcoming book on the intersection of video games and filmic properties. (Perhaps we’re kidding. Perhaps Disney didn’t return our phone calls. Who can say?) However, in many ways, *Wreck-It Ralph* is the perfect amalgam, really, more the perfect metaphor, for what the book you are holding concerns. The movie represents a progressive movement towards a long-coming convergence of film and video game. It’s a synthesis of cultures a very, very long time in the making, and its time has finally come.

That’s not something to be taken for granted. When many think about video games, they still think about arcade and early console games such as *Pong*, *Pac-Man*, and *Super Mario Bros.* more so than the current game platforms and phenomena everyone partakes of now (e.g., iOS games like *Angry Birds*, *Fruit Ninja*, and *Plants Vs. Zombies*). Granted, there’s good reason for that thinking, as those early games are the genesis point of the cross-platform/cross-media video game technology so common today. Still, those noteworthy video games have an even richer history going as far back as the 1950s with works such as *Tic-Tac-Toe* and *Spacewar!* It’s difficult to admit, but, over the course of the research of this book, we frequently nodded our heads in bewilderment as we tried to trace how a cabinet game involving a malnourished, yellow circle missing a pie-wedge being chased by ghosts around a labyrinth somehow led to our children borrowing our mobile phones so that they could upstage our attempts to slingshot avian projectiles at crudely-assembled suidae-housing. Yet, it isn’t a much further stretch of the imagination to see how those earliest video games influenced movies like *Star Wars* (1977) or *War Games* (1983) or *Avatar* (2009). And while early games have a tenuous history of direct translation to film and television, other, more recent games make far clearer connections. Children’s games (such as *Dragon’s Lair* [1983], *Pokémon* [1996], *Final Fantasy* [1987], and *Kirby’s Dream Land* [1992]) found new and different lives in mediums ranging from film and television to novels, graphic novels, and toy playsets. Still other games, particularly those created for a more mature audience (such as the *Metal Gear* series [1987–present], *Halo* [2001], *Batman: Arkham Asylum* [2009], *Dead Space* [2008], *Heavy Rain* [2010], and *Silent Hill* [1999]), feature stories and cinematics that may outdistance the game elements and which have been — or are being — rendered into film and television formats. And, with a considerable number of movies and television programs looking at video games as a larger

conceit (e.g., *Tron* [1982], *Captain N: The Game Master* [1989], *The Wizard* [1989], *The Last Starfighter* [1984], *The Lawnmower Man* [1992], *Spy Kids 3D* [2003], *Scott Pilgrim Vs. the World* [2010], and *Wreck-It Ralph* [2012]), a greater connection seems to exist between the culture of video games and the players themselves than has been examined critically. This book will investigate the interconnectivity between video games and other forms of media in as many ways as we could fit in a single volume.

It is a volume that holds essays that identify, generate, and deploy fresh and exciting approaches to thinking about the ways that narrative texts (and medias, film and video games in particular) shape each other and interact with socio-cultural and economic forces in a variety of times and places. It offers readings and case studies of specific texts — a thing which is much needed at this moment in the field of adaptation study, if our work can so humbly be included there. The essays show how cross-textual readings and analysis can be done and how specific texts might be understood in relation to the emerging theories of media and narrative in our time.

The set of essays, together, also draws attention to gaps, absences — that is, essays that are still needed and notably missing from this collection. For example, work that considers game genres in relation to media convergence is much needed. Too, while a number of the contributors look to genre as a factor in film/game/media interplay, none took up the relationships between genre and media across media forms from the perspective of *game genres*. Most examine Hollywood genres (Western, Horror, Torture Porn, Epic) in games rather than the seepage of game genres (Hack and Slash, First-Person Shooter, Tower Defense) into film or other media. The set of essays also draws attention to the need for more, closer, extended attention to the many, many child-oriented pieces of transmedia. Only one of our essays takes up an E-is-for-Everyone-rated game, despite that fact that this is easily one of the largest areas of game production. This is puzzling — or perhaps not given our moment's general denigration of all things considered as "children's." For as even the examples in Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* indicate, many of the experiments with media play, adaptation, and transmedia are happening first in texts designed for and/or by children and young adults.

We also would have liked to have seen pieces on a text like Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* series, which deploys video game structure in a textual form (graphic novel) that itself incorporates multiple media (pictures and words), and that was then adapted and extended into both a video game and a popular feature film; or Patrick Carmen's *Skeleton Creek* series, which tells its story through a book one buys and a set of web videos one accesses using special codes embedded in print story's mystery plot. Missing too are studies of what one might call branching "adaptations," such as 2000's *American*

McGee's *Alice* and Tim Burton/Disney's 2010 *Alice in Wonderland*. We imagine, too, that readers of this book — like Joe and Gretchen, themselves, and probably most of the contributors — have many questions and thoughts about “where are the...?” other game-to-media relationships (book readers? iOS? phones that are computers that are books that are video games?). We understand. We can relate. We had a word count. We like to think of this book as a possible beginning of a field of scholarship, and much remains to be done. However, the set of essays here offers an engaged, thoughtful, provocative launch pad. It is not a disappointing ending involving an intentionally obfuscated, saccharine kiss from a princess, but merely the press of the start button on the conversation about the ways and means of story in the vast and varied media landscape of our moment.

And yet, nothing as worthwhile as this collection comes about without great predecessors; this book is by no means the first to notice the need for scholarly discussion about film/video game interplay. We would mention one in particular: Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's now-out-of-print 2002 collection, *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, as it grew out of observations similar to ours. In fact, King and Krzywinska's introduction lays out many of the very same questions that underlie the book in your hands:

What happens in the interface between big screen and game console or PC? Is there a merging of languages, to some extent, as games influence movies and movies influence games? Are some films becoming more like games, as some commentators suggest? And what about games, a relatively new and unstudied part of the global audio-visual entertainment industry? To what extent do they draw on the characteristics of Hollywood or other forms of cinema, beyond the realm of the immediate spin-off title? Or have these convergences been overstated? How might films and videogames offer their own distinct approaches and pleasures? [1].

However, whereas that book limited its approach in terms of “games-in-light-of-the-cinema” because of “the relative underdevelopment of videogames as a field for close formal or textual analysis” (2), this book emphasizes the interplay from both directions: film as game, game as film. Our writers make attempts to consider the places where the two media converge and diverge; how and for what purposes they borrow and adapt from each other; where they extend such processes into interactions with other media forms; and the social, cultural, historical, and political implications of such relations. These strands of thought emerge from video game scholarship's debates about the role of story in games, film studies scholars' recent re-consideration of the theories and processes of adaptation, the broader field of media studies and its efforts to conceptualize contemporary media trends in relation to social structures, and the even larger discussions art, genre, narrative, cultural forms,



and epistemological movements such as postmodernism that appear across a range of disciplines.

There are several institutional entities and actual people to whom we are both deeply grateful. First and foremost, we must express our gratitude to our colleagues in the Department of English at Central Michigan University. We thank them for both their congeniality and for the environment of intellectual support and inspiration they offer. In particular, though, we would like to thank our Chair, William Wandless, who must be thanked at every turn for taking the helm of such a large and complex ship; and we want to express our bottomless appreciation to the department's support staff, Jamie Fockler and Denise Abbey, without whom our work-lives would be much less pleasant and far less efficient... Which is a polite way of saying that they keep the ship afloat. Beyond our home department, we would also like to thank Central's College of Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences and its Dean, Pamela Gates, for supporting research at our university, as well as for encouraging this research specifically. Central's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, in particular its Committee on Faculty Research and Creative Endeavors and its former Chair, Cathy Hicks Kennard, also has our deepest gratitude. The grant money they allocated to this project was used to purchase research materials as well as hire an assistant to help with final preparation of the manuscript and indexing. Further, while it *almost* goes without saying that we are in the debt to the scholars whose work appears in this volume (Most excellent job, friends!), it doesn't quite. You all have been a pleasure to work with, and we hope that our paths will cross frequently as we all make our ways through academia and this new and exciting area within media studies. Finally in our collective thanks, we would like to give a huge shout out to Justin Wigard, who not only assisted us in a variety of ways with this project (including being the copyeditor/ editorial assistant [Joe gave him a raise.] mentioned above), but who is also an extremely talented, hard-working, all-around good person and future academic, who we are grateful to have worked with and even more lucky to know. Truly, for all our combined efforts, he made many BIG PLAYS!

Individually, we would like to acknowledge a few people as well.

**Joseph Michael Sommers**, first and foremost, would like to thank Gretchen for putting up with him during this project. It could have only been brought to fruition with her meticulous eyes, concern for the scholarship, and passionate inquiry into pushing it into a tremendous audacity. He also thanks his students at Central Michigan University, for talking with him twice weekly and bringing forth their brilliance and laughter. Also, to his wife, Sulynn, and his daughter, Maggie, there aren't words to sufficiently thank them. Finally, this book, for him, would not exist without the love of his

grandfather, Joe Passarelli, who taught him to do whatever he wanted, just as long as he did it well.

**Gretchen Papazian** would like to thank her parents, who have always supported her academic interests and ambitions. She would also like to thank Annette Wannamaker, who early in her work on video games expressed the kind of intellectual interest that helped confirm such work was, in fact, both possible and valuable. She would also like to thank her long-time friend Amelie Hastie, who offers a model of scholar, teacher, thinker, artist, and friend. Of course, she thanks her co-editor, Joe Sommers, whose spunk, silliness, and general brightness in all areas made the work of collaboration a true pleasure. Last and most importantly, her deepest debt is to her life-partner, Matthew Roberson, who really does put up with a lot of crankiness from her, especially when she is working under deadlines; and her children, Nicholas and Alice, both of whom inspire her every day.



# Introduction:

## Manifest Narrativity — Video Games, Movies, and Art and Adaptation

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GRETCHEN PAPAZIAN *and* JOSEPH MICHAEL SOMMERS

Video games are not art ... I was a fool for mentioning video games in the first place [and] I should not have written ... without being more familiar with the actual experience of video games. This is inarguable.— Roger Ebert, 2005

Video games are, in fact, art.... Art is the process of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions.— Kellee Santiago, 2009

This is not a book about art — whatever “art” is or may be. However, it is a book that, in its earliest stages, arose from a discussion of art by one of the most visible media pundits of the twentieth, let-alone, twenty-first century: Roger Ebert. Ebert, a movie critic, journalist, prolific writer of prose and criticism, and frequent, if not ubiquitous, online presence, generated a bit of an uproar by claiming, *ad nauseum ad infinitum*, that video games lack the aesthetic quality and power of other narrative media.<sup>1</sup> Initially, his position held some reason:

There is a structural reason for [the “inherent inferiority” of video games]: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control.

I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art.... That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic [Ebert 2005].

Galling to many ("loss of ... precious hours" indeed), Ebert's position seemed somewhat thoughtful or at least considerate. By 2010, however, he hardened and he was done: "Video games can never be art," he wrote. End of discussion. Mind you, he also openly admitted, throughout the sequence of his "evaluation" of video games (Ebert 2005, 2010), that he was entirely unfamiliar with playing them in the first place. Not even *Pac-Man*.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the response to Ebert — or rather, perhaps, the position he insists on — has not been balanced, measured, or polite. However, there are those who have tried to make sense of his complaints. For example, Kellee Santiago, a video game designer from the University of Southern California, was willing to give his perspective its due. She agreed with Ebert that few video games have achieved the same sorts of artistic accomplishments as (some) films and literature, but she also reminded Ebert that painting, easily considered by most as unequivocally-accepted art, started out as "chicken scratch" on cave walls before evolving into more complex chicken scratching on more complex walls, such as Michelangelo's fresco, "The Creation of Adam," which adorns the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Santiago's point is straightforward: before one can perform any great aria, one must discover music and hone a voice to the precision of a musical instrument; before one can learn to sing that well, one must first learn to use one's voice to create words and then set them to music ... and the human race first likely started using their voices to create words in order to warn some Flintstone-like cave dweller, "Hey, there's a cougar behind you!"

Moreover, Santiago's response draws attention to the notion of "art" embedded within Ebert's position. He is, after all, primarily a film critic, and film was not always considered art. (Something he is well aware of.) Even Werner Herzog, one of Ebert's unequivocally favorite film directors, remarked in *Herzog on Herzog*, "Film is not the art of scholars but illiterates" (70). Even earlier, in 1961, Jean Cocteau rarified that position even a bit further. In an interview with *Esquire*, he referred to film quite simply as a "petrified fountain of thought" (46). In fact, motion pictures likely were considered as little more than perfunctory pictures that happened to move sequentially up until the French philosopher Henri Bergson recognized moving images as something worthy of study, of criticism, in his 1896 work *Matière et mémoire* (*Matter and Memory*). Granted, just ten years later, in his essay "*L'illusion cinématographique*," he denies that movies were what he had in mind. However, let no mistaken interpretation halt the progress of a revolution: a year after that essay was published came Ricciotto Canudo's *The Birth of the Sixth Art* (1911), oft-acknowledged as the first formal study of the medium of motion pictures.<sup>3</sup> What was done was not to be undone, and it is our commonly-held belief that there would be very few who would watch Georges Méliès *Le*

*Voyage dans la lune* and not acknowledge it as art. Some more recent talkies just the same. All in all, this history serves to remind us all that movies were once perceived as Ebert views video games. (A point he too might readily acknowledge.)

This discussion of art might seem a curious starting point for a book examining the intersection of video games and movies. Then again, as with Ebert's position, it is not *just* that video games are a newer media that has not yet reached its potential as art. Author, film director, and video game writer, Clive Barker, clarifies:

I think that Roger Ebert's problem is that he thinks you can't have art if there is that amount of malleability in the narrative. In other words, Shakespeare could not have written *Romeo and Juliet* as a game because it could have had a happy ending, you know? If only she hadn't taken the damn poison. If only he'd have gotten there quicker [in Ebert 2010].

In her response to Ebert, Santiago works to dismantle the divide he constructs between art and form by arguing that "art is the process of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions"; the mechanics of the process — the form of the art — is irrelevant.<sup>4</sup> Still, Ebert's "problem" raises questions more central to this book than ones merely of "Are video games art?" For, it draws attention to the operation of narrative, of story, in relation to different media forms, and, in this, it suggests that a key difference between game and film emerges from differences in their individual storytelling mechanics.

Ebert is not alone in noticing the difference. In fact, within the scholarship on video games that has emerged in this first part of the twenty-first century, much of the debate in both video games and video game studies has fixed on the idea of narrative. Are games a narrative form? Can the tools of literary and film studies be used to analyze games, or are they a vastly different kind of thing? On the one side of the conversation, there are those, like Janet Murray, Ken Perlin, and Michael Mateas — the narratologists — who have argued quite persuasively that video games stand as a new form of storytelling, a form that speaks of and to the increasingly game-like and role-oriented modes of everyday experiences in the postmodern world. On the other side are those, like Markku Eskelinen, Espen Aarseth, and Stuart Moulthrop — the ludologists — who have argued, also quite persuasively, that video games belong to the realm of *games*, not narrative; they function via strategy and skill, logic and experiment; they are interactive. Ebert's position clearly falls into this second, ludic, camp: "Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control" ("Why?").

More recently, the conversation has taken a turn beyond such simple

binary constructions of “narrative or game”? Both Henry Jenkins and Marie-Laure Ryan, contend that, ontologically, video games operate neither in the realm of narrative nor in the domain of game, exclusively. Instead, video games are — or, more accurately, can be (some are; some aren’t) — *hybrid*, both narrative and game. Extending this view in relation to operations of narrative, Henry Jenkins, Tadhg Kelly, and Gretchen Papazian argue that, in games that have a narrative component, the emphasis of story becomes what Jenkins identifies as world-designing, space-sculpting, “narrative architecture” (“Game Design”), and Kelly calls “worldmaking,” using a new narrative point of view Papazian deems “fourth person” (Papazian 452). In other words, rather than the kinds of plot events or character development/psychology at the center of film/literature texts, game texts emphasize the making of place (Jenkins, Kelly) and the collective “who” (player, avatar, game designers) of “who is making the story” (Papazian). In reaching beyond the narratology/ludology binary, as well as the sorts of staid conversations that once also besieged movies concerning art and artifice, such approaches move the conversation into discussions of how do games/gamers create worlds and experience? When, where, and how are games hybrid? Are these the sorts of games that have more (or less) potential to be translated into other media — including, but certainly not limited to, film?

And that is what this book concerns: adaptation and intersection within video games and filmic experiences. Anyone who has gone to a movie theater of late knows that Hollywood seems to have finally become utterly bereft of original ideas for narrative and plot; whereas anyone who has purchased a video game lately recognizes the “every-feature-film-(and popular television show)-must-have-a-game-version-too” mentality that seems to dominate the shelves. Perhaps these are exaggerations; perhaps not. Clearly, though, the American film industry has mined the video game industry since at least the 1970s for both stories and storytelling modes, creating movies that involve gaming as part of the plot. Think *Tron* (1982) and its recent sequel *Tron: Legacy* (2010), and its even more recent television series *Tron: Uprising* (2012); or, remember *War Games* (1983) and its implicit metaphor of video games — or at least one gamer’s obsession with games — potentially causing the fall of Western Civilization. *The Last Starfighter* (1984) even used the idea of playing video games as the proving ground to test the mettle of a young man who fights either to save the Earth or win the admiration of his girlfriend. More frequently, however, the interaction between film and video games takes the form of adapting video game stories to film (*Super Mario Bros* [1993], *Street Fighter* [1994, 2009], *Mortal Kombat* [1995], *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* [2001], *Doom* [2005], *Silent Hill* [2006], etc.); adopting mechanics of digital storytelling and gameplay, such as clear-the-level plot structures and try-die-try-again



movement through the story (*The Matrix* [1999], *Run Lola Run* [1998]); and/or drawing on video game production techniques, including movies seemingly crafted almost entirely out of computer-generated images. (Jar Jar be damned.)

The movement of story, aesthetics, mechanics, and production has not been a one-way road by any means. In an effort to sate players who crave immersive, interactive narrative experiences, the video game industry has increasingly borrowed from the film industry. Increasingly, in fact, the two industries work together, creating games as product tie-ins for films and film franchises,<sup>5</sup> and collaborating to create films and/or television series as product tie-ins for video game stories (e.g., *Pokémon* or any of the number of television anime series, including *Dragon Warrior: The Legend of the Hero Abel* [1989] inspired by the *Dragon Quest* [1986] games). Perhaps less obviously but even more importantly for this book's efforts, video game makers mine the film industry for stories and story type (i.e., Horror [*Silent Hill* (1999), *Alan Wake* (2010)], the Western [*Prince of Persia* (1989), *Oregon Trail* (1971)], Gangster films [*Street Fighter* (1987), *The Warriors* (2005)], Detective narratives [*Professor Layton and the Curious Village* (2007), *L.A. Noire* (2011)]), visual styling (i.e., *mise-en-scène*), and the mechanics of storytelling such as those increasingly ubiquitous filmic cutscenes that move a game's story along, point-of-view camera positions, and even filmic techniques such as suture. The ways in which the two media take up, adapt, and/or play with conventions of the other — borrowings and processes that Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin call "remediation" in their book of the same name — sometimes echo each other, sometimes harmonize, and sometimes create absolute cacophony. Nonetheless, these interactions call out for scholarly attention. Loudly.

Admittedly, the scholarly study of adaptation has a long history in the study of film. Indeed, it is one of the most common and longest running approaches to film in both popular and academic discussions.<sup>6</sup> Alas, until very recently it has also been one of the most neglected, almost maligned, within the field of film studies itself. Film scholar Thomas Leitch accounts for this by explaining that adaptation study "traces its descent more directly from literary studies," and it has tended, through an insistence on the topic of fidelity, to assert hierarchies of narrative art, aesthetic form, and chronology of production that privileged text over image as a storytelling mode (*Film Adaptation* 3).<sup>7</sup> However, at the very beginning of the twenty-first century, Leitch and, even more powerfully, his film studies colleague Robert Stam, rejected fidelity as the place to begin studying adaptations. Identifying adaptation as a process — rather than a pair of texts waiting to be compared — they drew attention to a complex series of operations manifest in the process. Stam, for instance, rejected the idea of there being an original text for any adaptation or any other sort of text, instead insisting, quite persuasively, that adaptations



must be conceptualized as part of the “ongoing whirl of intertextual references and transformations, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation with no clear point of origin” (“Beyond Fidelity” 66).

Adaptation, as such, has also begun to move out of film studies into other areas. For example, James Naremore has called for the study of adaptation to look beyond film and literature,

to be joined with the study of recycling, remaking, and every other form of retelling in the age of mechanical reproduction and electronic communication. By this means, adaptation will become part of a general theory of repetition, and adaptation study will move from the margins to the center of contemporary media study [15].

Linda Hutcheon’s 2006 *A Theory of Adaptation* begins this work in earnest. Looking to “video games, Web sites, graphic novels, song covers, operas, musicals, ballets, and radio and stage plays” as well as literature, film, and television, she theorizes “adaptations as *adaptations*,” shifting attention from individual media to “the very act of adaptation” as a focus of study (xiv). In systematically taking up the “What? Who? Why? How? Where? [and] When?” that characterize adaptations as a phenomenon of text, she argues that adaptation is a form characterized by “repetition without replication,” a form defined by a fluidity of back-and-forth migrations of thought, belief, and culture across time and media, as well as between producers and consumers (vii–ix). She highlights that adaptations believe, as well as show, that versions of a story exist laterally — not vertically as classically conceived; a story functions differently in different cultures at different times, and each version affects the versions that came before it as much as those that came (or will come) after. Most significantly in terms of the project in hand, though, Hutcheon fixes on variation in the ways stories are told (telling, showing, by generating physical or pseudo-physical experience through interaction) in order to theorize “adaptation” as a process of creation, a process of reception, *and* a product. These three — the three ways stories are told (showing, telling, interacting) and the three aspects of adaptations (creation, reception, texts) — and the myriad ways they intersect and interact with each other stand at the center of much of the discussion in this book.

As does story! For, all of the characterization of aspects and processes of adaptation, as well the attention to play, interplay, recycling, ongoing whirls, bring to mind several very simple, yet very complicated questions: What actually *is* narrative today in 2013? What can it be? Is there anything that it can not be? Henry Jenkins approaches the topic quite deftly in his book *Convergence Culture*, in which he identifies and discusses a new, media paradigm, one in which “old and new media collide, ... grassroots and corporate media

intersect, [and] ... the power of the media consumer and the power of the producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (2). The paradigm does not merely concern type, economics, and power, though; it also involves the content and form of story. Stories/narratives have become vast: that is, progressive and open-ended. They exist not as single, independent texts but in what video game scholars such as Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin label "multiple instantiations" (2); film scholars like Leitch, Stam, Hutcheon might claim as their kind of dialogic, whirling adaptation; and Jenkins himself calls "transmedia" (20). There is "a new aesthetic" at play here, Jenkins claims; a story "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (20, 97–98).

This multimedia, multimodal system of story delivery makes all sorts of new and different demands on media consumers as well. In addition to interacting more directly with media producers as noted above, the new media paradigm requires consumers to take up "the role of hunters and gathers, chasing down bits of information across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience" (Jenkins 21). In other words, being a media consumer means collaborating with other media consumers, as well as producers. Likewise, added to shifts in the "where the story appears" and the "how the story is consumed," the actual "who" of the storyteller has evolved alongside these developments (into "fourth" person?!), for these sorts of stories are developed by both professionals and fans and in relation to each other's stories. All of which, of course, raises questions about canon and canonicity (What is "official"? What is not? And, perhaps, most importantly, who really cares?), while also discarding long-standing notions about ownership and property. To say that such developments represent exciting times and radical modalities is a bit of an understatement. It also tends to result in a greater frequency of pronounced "air-quoting" in introductions trying to take into account so many new epistemological concerns lacking proper identification.

The essays in this volume take on, theorize, and offer case studies of the various points of convergence in the landscape of contemporary media — particularly, the intersections emerging in relation to contact between video games and other media (especially, but not exclusively, film). The essays might have been organized in a variety of ways, including according to critical/theoretical approach, media emphasis, or even scholarly field. Instead, we choose to arrange the essays in groupings that draw attention to the ways, workings, and possibilities of story in the present moment. While the first section draws attention to modes of storytelling (showing, telling, interacting), the second

looks to the sociological conditions of storytelling (time, place, ideological underpinnings), and the third explores the growing vastness of narrative in the age of transmedia storytelling. These essays together highlight that media convergence is — much like story has always been — an *in-process* art. Anchoring such a study to video games — a media still in the process of defining and developing itself — puts an even finer point on the subject.

In the book's first section, "The Rules of Engagement: Watching, Playing, and Other Narrative Processes," contributors investigate what happens when a story moves from a media that tells to one that demands interaction (or vice-versa). In setting Joss Whedon's 1997–2003 television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* next to one of the video games attached to the series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* (2003), Katrin Althans finds game narratives can powerfully augment and reinforce filmic/televisual genre conventions — in particular, the often transgressive notions of gender contained within the Gothic — as players bring these conventions to life through gameplay. She holds that, "the player of *Chaos Bleeds* deconstructs the traditional Gothic heroine and thus becomes the agent of cross-media interactivity by enacting ideas familiar from other parts of the Buffyverse." Deborah Mellamphy, too, finds media consumers' agency in/over the narrative a vital distinction between the operation of film and the working of video games texts. As she explores the ways spectatorship manifests in film/video game Torture Porn (an especially graphic, violent version of Horror that seems to take pleasure in brutality), Mellamphy finds that games such as 2006's *Dead Rising* "show that violence in cinema" (as represented by movies such as *Saw* [2004] or *Wolf Creek* [2005]) "involves a different type of gaze than violence in video games." For, in games, the audience becomes the proponent, the actual agent, of violence, as well as being spectators to it. Fascinatingly and in stark opposition to media watchdogs, Mellamphy argues for the increased, cathartic effect such games generate in relation to the stresses and fears of images in our moment.

Jason W. Buel, like Althans and Mellamphy, situates his discussion in relation to genre — a topic we will return to before the close of this introduction. He compares the narrative elements of a set of Western video games, including *The Oregon Trail* (1971) and *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), to the conventions of classic Western films, to argue that video games' invocation of classic film genres not only "elevates games to higher level of artistry and prestige" but also encourages deeper, critical reflection on the ideologies conventionally embedded in these genres (especially the sense of American exceptionalism fixed in the Western) by actively — interactively — involving the player in the construction of such ideologies. Ben S. Bunting Jr.'s and Marcus Schulzke's approaches differ from Althans's, Mellamphy's, and Buel's, in that they situate their claims about storytelling modes (showing verses interactive)



in relation to the (relative) failure of all game-to-film adaptations. For Schulzke, such adaptations have generally failed because they have not been able “to adequately translate between different media’s types of interactivity.” Hutcheon’s exploration of different modes of interaction in chapter four of *A Theory of Adaptation*, “How? (Audiences),” sets out some of the same ideas in slightly different terms, but Schulzke’s essay offers the kind of case study examples that Hutcheon left to her readers and other scholars. Rather than directly charting failures, in his essay, Bunting takes up a specific game-to-film adaptation (Jordan Mechner’s game *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* [2003], adapted to film in 2010 by Disney), delineating the ways in which Disney’s *Prince of Persia* comes closer to being a successful film rendering by staying “true to its medium” more so than any film-based-on-a-game thus far. Ultimately, he suggests some possible strategies for “how to build a better adaptation” — strategies that include greater attention to structures of interaction available via film versus those accessible through video games.

The second section, “The Terms of the Tale: Time, Place, and that Other Ideologically Constructed Conditions,” turns attention to the role conditions of context play in adaptation. Like Mellamphy, Aubrey Anable tackles representations of violence as they play out in film versus game across time. In examining two versions of a story (Walter Hill’s 1979 film, *The Warriors*, and Rockstar Games’ 2005 reinterpretation of the movie as game — *The Warriors*), Anable finds that 26-plus years of radical shifts in political and social climates impact the story’s ideological messages about urban violence as much as the form of media through which the story plays. Denise A. Ayo introduces print media to the conversation, as she looks at a game adapted from an epic poem, across a time chasm of 700-plus years and two continents. Remarkably, and quite convincingly, she finds the game (Visceral Games’ *Dante’s Inferno* [2010]) a successful adaptation of a fourteenth-century poem (Dante Alighieri’s *The Inferno* [1308c]) despite, and even more because of, its hypermasculination and sexualization of the medieval poem’s characters. David McGowan’s discussion of the triangulation of three texts — Martin Campbell’s film *GoldenEye* (1995), Rare/Nintendo’s game *GoldenEye 007* (1997), and Eurocom/Activision’s update to that game, *GoldenEye 007* (2010) — complicates this section on context and adaptation by introducing the notion of the remake, as well as drawing attention to the roles played by systems of production and commercial interests in film-to-game adaptations. Stewart Chang, who looks to game-to-game adaptation, adds the important matter of location and national culture to this set of essays on context. He argues that the process by which games such as the *Dynasty Warriors* series are “localized” from Japan for Western markets erases aspects of Japanese culture that might be deemed offensive to Western sensibilities (especially those tied to gender roles), while they

paradoxically “allow American consumers to derive racial and misogynistic pleasure” by inculcating an image of a racialized, sexualized, Asian “Other.”

The final section, “Stories, Stories Everywhere (and Nowhere Just the Same): Transmedia Texts,” expands the collection even further beyond film/game adaptation, calling attention to the significant place adaptation study holds in media studies more broadly, while it also directs attention to stories being told across media forms. Michael Fuchs’s study of narrative structures in Remedy Entertainment’s *Alan Wake* (2010) and the game’s interlocuting web series companion, *Bright Falls*, opens this section because it illuminates a set of innovative strategies that “reshape — or even eliminate — the storytelling divide between video games and other visual media.” Felan Parker looks at a vastness of franchise and media. In his piece on the Star Wars omniverse, he considers questions of authenticity, originality, and canon in relation to the variety of media forms — including, film, television, toys, books, video games — that make up the “official” and “unofficial” stories of the Star Wars Universe. TreaAndrea M. Russworm’s discussion of racial stereotypes and the character Ninja Ninja in Namco Bandai’s 2009 *Afro Samurai* would have easily fit into the previous section as it looks to textual (manga, anime) and cultural materials for the source of the game’s stereotypes and parody (and it also offers a nice complement and counterpoint to Chang’s piece). However, it has been located here in order to draw attention to its arguments about the transmedia story of race and racialized constructions in our moment. For, Russworm finds that the game’s story and adaptations of established characters “deliberately make dilemmas surrounding stereotype, parody, and psychology,” especially through the character Ninja Ninja, who “is an extension an ideological system that produces controlling images of Black masculinity as racialized caricature.” Lisa K. Dusenberry’s essay on *Disney Epic Mickey* (2010) concludes both this section and the book perfectly, as it takes up many of the terms that play through the collection; it explores the (trans) mediation of the Disney brand through and across a variety of media. Moreover, in its exploration of the operation of nostalgia, it reveals a game using an emotional process that operates much like adaptation itself does, as, per Bolter and Grusin, tension is created through the story’s “immediacy” (the lived-ness of something, its presence “in the/its moment,” the ephemeral nature of the now of a text) and textual “hypermediacy” (a consciousness of the ways in which one media draws on the devices associated with another).

In looking at the set of essays together, it is tempting to conclude that one of the things this book suggests is that adaptation generally, as well as film-video game interplay specifically, is a genre: a grouping of texts of a type. Encouraging such a suggestion is renowned French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s characterization of genre as a way that texts participate in — rather



than belong to — certain typologies. And, yet, few are willing to make such a claim. Notably, Hutcheon is unwilling to go so far, and adaptation scholar Christine Geraghty quite firmly asserts that adaptation is NOT a generic category. She writes, “The term [adaptation] is too broad and lacks any specific weight in terms of narrative organization, characterization, iconography, or setting” (8). Nonetheless, as several of our book’s scholars draw attention to, genre analysis offers an illuminating *entre* into adaptation study perhaps because it is a term that, like adaptations themselves, works in a variety of ways, serving a variety of purposes, for a variety of people in various times and places. Genre theorist Rick Altman claims, for example, that “genre ... is not your average descriptive term, but a complex concept with multiple meanings,” including

- genre as *blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production;
- genre as *structure*, as the formal framework on which individual films are founded;
- genre as *label*, as the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors;
- genre as *contract*, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience [14].

In other words, “genre” describes the dynamic, multilayered relationships between industry, audience, and text wherein generic labels become a means through which producers construct, industry sells, and consumers engage with texts. Although Altman specifically speaks of film, Geraghty’s work on film adaptation and genre, along with Hutcheon’s extension of adaptation study out of film studies, highlight the appropriateness of and the acute need for attention to the role of genre as it manifests in multiple media’s interplay with each other as they share their stories and means of telling stories with each other.

*Game On, Hollywood!* begins such work — as it shows a number of other directions the study of adaptations could go, would go, and should go, as well. It contains a set of essays that offer deep and thoughtful insights about the ways story is being shaped by a range of interacting media, their structures, their consumers and producers, and a myriad of intersecting socio-cultural, economic, artistic and ideological forces of our moment. It offers readings and case studies of specific texts, showing how they might be understood in light of the emerging theories of media and narrative. *Game On, Hollywood!* also seeks to remove the sense of video games as an inferior medium from the world of media studies. As Santiago’s quotation established at the outset, video games, as much as films or anything else, possess the capacity to be art. But perhaps that is not what is at issue here at all. The essays in this volume illustrate

that the idea of text and textual adaptation, itself, seems to be becoming a malleable concept or form that transcends time, space, and issues of authority in a way that we have not seen in the past.

For now, though, we are at the place of looking really, really hard at the texts of media convergence, how they operate, what they share, where they succeed, where they fail, and the stories they tell — in all their greatness and all their vastness. In many ways, such examination, in its relative infancy, is more of an art than a science. As such, perhaps this is a book about art as much as it is about anything else.

## NOTES

1. For an excellent counterpoint to Ebert's statements, refer to Aaron Smuts's essay "Are Video Games Art?" And perhaps more interesting, while Ebert may hold qualms with the idea of video games as an art form, the United States National Endowment for the Arts declared that video games were eligible for funding, ostensibly recognizing them as an art form (Protalinski). Not surprisingly, other noteworthy institutions have as well: On March 16, 2012, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, one of the greatest such institutions in the United States, opened an exhibit entitled, "The Art of Video Games." It is described as: one of the first exhibitions to explore the forty-year evolution of video games as an artistic medium, with a focus on striking visual effects and the creative use of new technologies. It features some of the most influential artists and designers during five eras of game technology, from early pioneers to contemporary designers. The exhibition focuses on the interplay of graphics, technology and storytelling [*Smithsonian*].

When the exhibit first opened, Smithsonian visitors were greeted by a large, hyperbolized and three-dimensional Pac-Man. Millions of inner-children within gamers cried and possibly booked passage to the museum. It's the description of the exhibit, however, that rejoins Santiago's remarks: "graphics, technology, and storytelling."

2. And, if you believe that, we have some property south of Chicago we would like to sell you; in 1993, in one of television's *defining* moments as an art form, Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel played an early version of a Sega Genesis handsfree boxing title (using what Siskel described as an "activator body ring." Even if he does not consider the narrative of the game itself as art, surely, his dance moves must be considered artistic to some degree. We will leave that to the reader to judge with a visit to YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAtr7LsenJ8&feature=player\\_embedded#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAtr7LsenJ8&feature=player_embedded#!) For the record, Ebert has also stated that he actually has enjoyed such titles as *Cosmology of Kyoto* and *Myst*, even if he found the latter frustrating.

3. In true revisionist fashion, Canudo came to recognize cinema as actually the *seventh* art. At the time of publication, he had forgotten dance (Bordwell 29).

4. Interestingly enough, Stanley Kubrick thinks very similarly: "A film is — or should be — more like music than like fiction. It should be a progression of moods and feelings. The theme, what's behind the emotion, the meaning, all that comes later" (Kagan 231).

5. For a discussion of the business mechanics at work in such collaborations, see Robert Alan Brookey.

6. For a concise survey of the history of the film scholarship on adaptation, see the work of Sarah Cardwell, Kamilla Elliott, and/or James Naremore.

7. James Naremore, Dudley Andrews, Robert Stam, and Linda Hutcheon are among the "others" who have expressed it in their work. Leitch's "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation," however, stands as the most direct, concise articulation of this position.

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**PART I. THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT:  
WATCHING, PLAYING AND  
OTHER NARRATIVE PROCESSES**

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## • CHAPTER 1 •

# Playing the Buffyverse, Playing the Gothic: Genre, Gender and Cross-Media Interactivity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds*

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KATRIN ALTHANS

### Introduction: The Buffyverse Goes Cross-Media

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* first aired on Warner Bros. Network in March 1997,<sup>1</sup> some five years after the release of the film of the same name. The series features an all-American teenage girl, Buffy Ann Summers, and her calling as the Chosen One. It is Buffy's destiny to battle the powers of evil in the suburban surroundings of Sunnydale, a fictional California valley town, which is unfortunately situated atop the infamous Hellmouth, a gateway to another dimension filled with demons. During the series' seven seasons, Buffy encounters several Big Bads, who become more and more powerful as the show progresses, until Buffy has to confront The First, the show's representation of ultimate and invincible evil. Both during its actual run and in its wake, this Buffyverse, as series creator Joss Whedon's fictional universe has been dubbed by fans, inspired a whole range of cross-media franchise applications including novels, comics, board and card games, a website, calendars, a successful spin-off series, *Angel*, and two console video games.<sup>2</sup>

The first console game, entitled simply *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, was developed by Electronic Arts and The Collective exclusively for Xbox and was released in September 2002. Advertised as a lost episode of season three, the game was neatly embedded into the TV show and allowed the player to "step into the shoes of Buffy Summers" ("Advertizing"). The second game,



and the focus of this paper, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds*, was released for all major console platforms by Fox Interactive in October 2003, and also presents a lost episode of the TV series. Situated sometime during the series' fifth season, the game, according to Fox Interactive, "brings all the excitement surrounding Sunnydale's 'Hellmouth' straight into your home" (Eurocom Entertainment Software). The player's living room thus ostensibly turns into the main location of the gameplay and the player becomes part of the game's story: s/he is drawn into the game and asked to participate in the construction of its plot, allowing the gamer to create a personalized part of the Buffyverse. Although this essay approaches the game from a narratological (as opposed to a ludological) angle, it argues that "a truly authentic Buffy experience" needs the player's agency ("Advertisizing ... *Chaos Bleeds*"). This experience, however, is one of cross-media interactivity, as the player's agency is required to construct, through play, the ideas of genre and gender that are promoted not only throughout the Buffyverse but also across the range of its media. Thus, this construction through play—*Erspielen*—allows for players to not simply author their versions of the storyline, as suggested by the advertisements, but to enact the very notion of cross-media entertainment itself in terms of genre and gender: the player is no longer only entertained by the show's Gothic ideologies but actively brings them to life during the gameplay.

## Cross-Media Interactivity

A starting point for the discussion of cross-media interactivity is what P. David Marshall refers to as "new intertextual commodities," by which he means medial cross-references (film, game, toys etc.) that the contemporary entertainment industry licenses in order to promote their products (69). Marshall's focus on the industrial implications of such an advertising network, however, does not explain the transmission of ideas and ideologies between different media. Going beyond Marshall's approach, Henry Jenkins's theory of transmedia storytelling and Christy Dena's concepts of polymorphic fictions and transmedia fiction offer a theory of different media interacting to form the story instead of being simply another piece of franchise.<sup>3</sup> For Jenkins, transmedia storytelling "unfolds across multiple media platforms," and the different texts in different media each contribute to the understanding of the whole transmedia story (95). Such a multiplicity of different media environments also lies at the heart of Dena's theory of transmedia practice ("Practice" 1). As she later argues with regard to her concept of polymorphic fictions, a more refined development of her earlier transmedia practice, the various media

play “an active part [in] the meaning-making process” (“Multimedia” 188). While the notion of cross-media interactivity I put forward in this essay begins with such a storytelling across different media, its focus is on interactivity. For example, in the cross-media story of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the attraction of interactivity lies in the gendered discourse of the Gothic as exemplified in horror fiction. More specifically, in the case of *Chaos Bleeds*, the player constructs through play the underlying concepts of genre, gender, and agency that are taken from the TV show and the Buffyverse as a whole. The player of *Chaos Bleeds* deconstructs the traditional Gothic heroine and thus becomes the agent of cross-media interactivity by enacting ideas familiar from other parts of the Buffyverse. At the same time, s/he subverts the Gothic itself by *interacting* with a mode that traditionally needs to be experienced from a safe distance to be enjoyable. Through cross-media interactivity, players thus construct their very own understanding of the ideologies of Gothic and gender that the Buffyverse strives to spread.

## The Gothic Conventions of the Buffyverse

Oscillating between the poles of genre (the Gothic romance) and mode, as well as between those of noun and adjective, the Gothic, as Alastair Fowler points out, true to its transgressive nature, evades any clear-cut and thus limiting definition (109). Most scholars, however, agree that it features a range of stock elements and characteristics which return again and again in various manifestations (Botting, *Gothic* 2). As such, the Gothic is best understood as a literary tradition and cultural revenant that lives on to equip other genres with a set of recurring motifs. As what Gina Wisker calls “a branch of the Gothic,” horror shares the ideologies and conventions of its Gothic roots and occupies a similar position of modal qualification (13). Horror fiction therefore is always-also Gothic horror, and I will refer to Gothic conventions and their gendered ideologies throughout this essay as the source from which the Buffyverse as teenage horror fiction derives its very own agenda of heroes and heroines, as well as passivity and (inter)agency.

The show’s choice of setting is a case in point for its Gothic heritage-turned-horror. It is designed wholly in the tradition of the classic American Gothic, as it situates the uncanny within the family and emphasizes the home to which this unfamiliar-familiar returns. Although the town’s name alludes to a pastoral idyll, Sunnydale is no second Arcadia and evil literally lurks beneath the surface. Apart from very corporeal Gothic creatures that, night after night, emerge from the Hellmouth (a literal vagina dentata), the show touches on a number of rather more serious issues, including many actual

nightmares faced by American teenagers, such as dating violence, being ostracized by peer-groups, nasty cliques, family problems, or evil stepfathers. In short, social problems intrude in the guise of literal monsters that arise from the open graves of the American Gothic tradition with its focus on family life, domesticity, and the inner demons they conjure (Davenport-Hines 266, 303).<sup>4</sup> Reminiscent of its subversive origins, the Gothic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also expresses contemporary anxieties.

Yet, the character of Buffy herself turns the tables on classic perceptions of the Gothic. Buffy Summers became a new teenage icon soon after her debut, in no small part due to Joss Whedon's efforts to establish the character as a virgin in distress with a twist: "this movie was my response to all the horror movies I had ever seen where some girl walks into a dark room and gets killed. So I decided to make a movie where a blonde girl walks into a dark room and kicks butt instead" (quoted in Tracy 2). What Whedon refers to here is one of the standard tropes of the Gothic: the persecuted heroine held captive by a villainous aristocrat in his decaying castle. In this trope, Gothic fiction enriches its horror with a more explicit use of violence (Wisker 8). Resituating this heroine in the average 1990s American high school, the TV show in episode 1/01 "Welcome to the Hellmouth," establishes Buffy as the conventional Gothic heroine. Blonde, petite, shy, a little clumsy, and fond of fashion and make-up, Buffy (a pet form of the much more formal Elizabeth) makes her first appearance on the TV screen filmed from a high-angle position and shown sleeping in white, lace-trimmed bedding. All this denotes her girl-ish fragility and thus suitability to follow in the footsteps of prominent innocent victims of Gothic lineage.

Images of the traditional Gothic virgin in distress have been shaped by Horace Walpole's Isabella of *The Castle of Otranto* or M. G. Lewis's Antonia in *The Monk* and have since been cultivated by, among others, *King Kong's* Fay Wray as Ann Darrow and *Halloween's* scream queen Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie Strode. Such figures are trapped in dungeons and haunted mansions only to be rescued by a male hero, since they themselves are unable to avert calamity. Although feminist critics have noted that the idea of the virgin in distress is not as clear cut as is suggested here,<sup>5</sup> the basic formula of protagonist (Gothic heroine), antagonist (villain), and knight in shining armor (Gothic hero) is one of the most persistent conceptions of Gothic fiction. These formulaic gender conventions (such as the trapped heroine who is at the mercy of the cruel villain) have produced a lively debate — especially in feminist criticism — on the question of the Gothic's dual nature of submission to and subversion of society's values (Ellis 258). As Kate Ellis points out, the entrapment of the Gothic heroine works as a metaphor for women's confinement in patriarchy, while the restoration of order and inevitable happy ending of Gothic



fiction punish those who dared to transgress and reward those who were submissive (258). Noël Carroll points out a similar dependence on female submissiveness in horror fiction and traces this directly back to the Gothic, regarding the trope as “an enduring sexist warning that women should keep in line because they always are and ought to be at the mercy of males in patriarchal society” (196–7). Into this stiff corset of gender conventions then stumbles Buffy — and she is Gothic with a twist, as her development throughout both movie and TV series, from stereotypical all-American cheerleader to a self-confident and independent young warrior woman, completely subverts the idea of the heroine-victim that Gothic horror so predictably establishes in its narratives.

## Deconstructing the Gothic Heroine

In relation to the first Buffy game, Magdala Peixoto Labre and Lisa Duke have pointed out that the game not only paints a rather one-dimensional picture of Buffy but it also differs considerably from the TV show (148–50). On the other hand, they claim that both the TV show and the video game promote common gender stereotypes in that they construct their female protagonists as “frivolous and anti-intellectual” (148). To my mind, the persistence of gender clichés rather supports the show’s strategy of Buffy’s Gothic gender subversion by way of ostensible submission, which is deconstructed in both the TV show and in *Chaos Bleeds*. Buffy reverses the tried and tested gender roles and is the Gothic hero rather than heroine, whereas her male counterpart, Xander Harris, is usually portrayed as a cross-gendered Gothic heroine in need of protection. This reversal of gender roles, however, is not without ambiguity on the part of both Buffy and Xander, as, for example, Michelle Callander and Marc Camron have shown, but it is precisely because of this ambiguity that Buffy has become an epitome of “a new breed of female heroes” (Peixoto Labre and Duke 141). Buffy both kicks butt and looks good, traits which are at the core of her representation in *Chaos Bleeds*. Visually making use of a very blonde and feminine Buffy, the game, or rather its internal machine, only allows for the creation of a *female* Gothic hero. On the other hand, the figure of Buffy Summers can also be read as an apt container for the maiden body and as such represents a modern allegory of power — that is, the paradox of expressing male virtues in female form (Warner xix). Echoing England’s virgin queen with the full form of her name, Buffy in the beginning of the series displays one of the most important features of both the Gothic heroine and female allegories, namely virginity, and is chosen to let the good triumph over evil. In this, Buffy stands in a long line of warrior women, both



within the storyline of the Buffyverse (i.e., “in every generation, there is a chosen one”) and within history (i.e., Buffy seems a worthy heir to Penthesilea or Joan of Arc). The TV series itself plays with Buffy’s status as a warrior in episodes such as 6/08, “Tabula Rasa,” in which Buffy, right in the middle of the episode, calls herself Joan after all of the main protagonists lose their memories, and Buffy alone finds herself without any identifying documents: “I’ll name me ... Joan ... I feel like a Joan” (*BtVS* 6/08).

Unlike both her warlike and her Gothic predecessors, however, Buffy can rely on a group of friends, the “Slayerettes” (1/03, “The Witch”) aka “Scooby Gang” (2/09, “What’s my Line — Pt 1”), who complement her fighting powers with witchcraft and various other talents — a feature made ample use of in the video game, when the player assumes the avatars of Buffy’s friends. Although Buffy inevitably has to face her enemies alone in true heroic fashion, her calling as “The Chosen One” comes under review repeatedly within the show. Torn between her duty to save the world and her craving for a normal life, Buffy quarrels with her fate as a teenage slayer. Both show and video game thus offer a multi-dimensional point of view on the topic of the lone woman-at-arms, which the series enhances even further in its last episode, 7/22, “Chosen,” when in chapter five Buffy’s final and most fiendish foe, The First, uses her calling as a weapon against her: “‘Into every generation, a slayer is born. One girl in all the world. She alone will have the strength and skill to’ ... There’s that word again. What you are. How you’ll die. Alone.” (*BtVS* 7/22). Yet as Buffy clarifies, her destiny to battle the forces of evil singlehandedly eventually changes because of Buffy’s plan and her friend Willow’s powers:

In every generation, one slayer is born ... because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. This woman [points to Willow] is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule. I say my power should be *our* power. Tomorrow, Willow will use the essence of this scythe to change our destiny. From now on, every girl in the world who might be a slayer, will be a slayer. *Every girl who could have the power, will have the power. Can stand up. Will stand up. Slayers. Every one of us* [*BtVS* 7/22, emphasis added].

What is remarkable here is the fact that the prophecy concerning the Chosen One was invented by men, and women — most notably, the very women who once were the objects exposed to these men’s will — are now overruling and altering it, thus claiming power over their own bodies. Along with reclaiming the female body as the site of female rather than male agency goes the critical examination of the most important feature of every “engendered image,” the warrior woman’s virginity (Warner 63–87). Certainly, Buffy’s very name suggests the preservation of her virginity, and her character “is counterpoised

... against rebellious or nonconformist female characters” (Early 19), most notably against the fallen-from-grace slayer Faith, who enters the show in episode 3/03, “Faith, Hope and Trick.” Introduced as an offensively sexual character who has been summoned after Buffy’s death in season one and substitute slayer Kendra’s death in season two, Faith’s decline reaches a climax when she accidentally kills Sunnydale’s Deputy Mayor Allan Finch, a defenseless human, in 3/14, “Bad Girls.” Although her downfall seems associated with her low moral standards and sexual activities, it is rather her “Want-Take-Have” philosophy and her lack of remorse that put Faith in opposition to Buffy (*BtVS* 3/14). Still, Buffy’s sexual behavior does not align with that of a virgin heroine either. Within the series, she has three sexual relationships and numerous other love interests. Although Camron argues that Buffy’s sexual relationships do, after a short and painful deviation, go along with the proper behavior of high-school girls, Buffy nevertheless loses her virginity in season two. Hence, the fact that she retains her powers (and her life) after having had heterosexual intercourse differentiates Buffy from conventional female allegories and Gothic heroines, while it adds to the multi-faceted picture the series paints of its female characters.

## Agency in the Buffyverse

By subverting Gothic conventions of gender and not living up to the standards of a dutiful American high-school girl (a contemporary female allegory, it seems), Buffy unashamedly defies patriarchal power and claims agency. Long before the player of *Chaos Bleeds* is granted a similar kind of agency in order to literally play with both Gothic gender roles and the tradition of female warriors, the TV show already made some attempts in that direction, as part of the series’ consistent efforts to engage in a dialogue with fans by incorporating fan ideas into plots. According to Justine Larbalestier, this practice often resulted in stand-alone episodes that were influenced by discussions on the official fan posting board *The Bronze* (227). Seen by Larbalestier as responses to actual fan fiction, these stand-alone episodes “take place in an alternate universe away from the usual arc of the show” and usually even interfere with the respective season’s storyline and objectives (237). The use of such “what-if” scenarios, which are quite popular in fan fiction, accounts for the series’ appreciation of its audience’s right to create its bit of the Buffyverse within the official production. Episode 3/09, “The Wish” marks the first appearance of an alternate reality in which Buffy never came to Sunnydale, and where vampires are therefore in charge, among them Scooby-Gang members Xander and a lesbian Willow. Willow’s vampire alter ego then returns in

3/16, "Doppelgängland" (sic), only to establish a fan-inspired method of foreshadowing important themes of seasons to come. Season four, for example, sees Willow entering into a long-lasting lesbian relationship with Tara, and her vampiric nature is taken up again when Willow temporarily turns evil at the end of season six. This connects to another idea originally developed in fan circles and then produced as a stand-alone episode (4/09, "Something Blue"): Buffy and vampire archenemy Spike become romantically involved, a motif that is explored in detail in seasons six and seven. Such an incorporation of concepts stemming from fan communities highlights how traces of cross-media interactivity not only appear in the TV series but also function to question traditional distinctions of author and audience.

In the examples elaborated above, the series' producers made decisions to incorporate elements of fan fiction into the TV show, whereas video games seemingly allow players to *inter*-actively take over the position of the author. As Janet Murray has argued, though, this is a "misleading assertion [as there] is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself" (152). This "derivative authorship" of the interactor, according to Murray, allows for authoring one possible narrative out of the many possibilities created by the "procedural author" (153). Players participate in the creation of the game's plot with their inputs. Yet, it is this particular device which keeps track of these inputs and alters the plot accordingly. The text (along with its story) is understood as an unfinished form that is being played with (Cover 176). Interactivity derives from the very fact that the player controls *how* the story is being told, with the interactive ingredients at the player's command including puzzles, decisions, skills, and problem solving. Indeed, as a game developers' manual says, "The very notion of interactivity means that decisions and skills of the player will move the story in a certain direction. Thus, the game becomes the interface for the story. The player interacts with the game, which then results in the game presenting the actual underlying story back to the player" (Sawyer, Dunne, and Berg 112). Yet, the variations of the story are limited, since most story-driven games are goal-oriented, and the user has to follow pre-defined paths towards accomplishing the goals within a "fixed, if very large, range of alternatives and options" (Cover 186). For Murray, this "is not authorship but agency" (153). Unlike Buffy, who in the narrative of the TV show seized control and thus became the author of her fate, the player of *Chaos Bleeds* is still trapped within the confines of the game environment. Instead of authorship, s/he experiences the agency of constructing the gendered conventions of Gothic horror. Issues of agency and interactivity in the context of horror video games, however, call into question the very integrity of horror fiction as a genre.



## Horror Video Games and the Curse of Interactivity

In fact, several studies on the video game genre of survival horror focus concern on the level of interactivity offered by horror video games and how it relates to generic features of Gothic horror.<sup>6</sup> The possibilities of adapting horror fiction to the world of gameplay and interactivity seems to be limited due to what Carroll refers to as the predictability of horror plots (97–8). Nevertheless, video games and the player's control of the avatar, features which more often than not threaten the integrity of the body, echo horror's emphasis on violence and bodily harm (Wisker 8). In video games, the player's ability to keep the avatar alive interactively plays out Ann Radcliffe's famous claim that horror "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates [the faculties]" (149). Thus, the player does not simply mirror the characters' fears and responses towards the monster, as Carroll has argued with regard to the audience's emotions in horror fiction, but rather the player becomes responsible for creating both original and mirror image (18).

As Tanya Krzywinska argues in her essay on horror video games, "Hands-on Horror," the player's satisfaction when playing horror-inspired video games ties to predetermined storylines that offer limited input choices (208). According to Krzywinska, the condition of being out of control, e.g. in cutscenes, is necessary for true horror experiences: "Without this sphere of pre-determination, the traditional pleasures of horror are denied us" (211). Here, Krzywinska defends, even asks for, a limited interactivity of horror-based video games so that players can experience the enjoyable shudder of the Gothic tradition. This neatly ties in with Edmund Burke's thoughts on the sublime, a concept which has profoundly influenced Gothic fiction and which states that terror must not "press too nearly" in order to be enjoyed (36). As Krzywinska further argues, horror games often present the same Manichaeic dualism between good and evil as horror movies, thus habitual standards of Gothic fiction cannot be discarded within a game's narrative without violating prefabricated structures inherent in every Gothic text. Consequently, the game's central avatar cannot be killed in an ultimate sense like its enemies, and interacting with the narrative never allows for any *total* interaction:

Full interactivity would negate the authorial shaping of interaction and, with it, the possibility for a directed storyline, which is crucial to the development of the horror experience in film. It is for this reason that videogames mix interactivity with predetermined boundaries and intrusive interventions that channel the player's engagement with the game [Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror" 220].

For Laurie Taylor, horror video games instead of offering the player full control of the avatar "prevent mastery following the traditions of the Gothic to increase the power of horror" (52). Ultimately, the pleasure of playing horror games



lies in the very fact that the user is not in control but plays along a linear path (Kirkland 76). Thus, they are prime examples of “[h]orror [which] appears when fears come a little too close to home” (Botting, “Horror” 185).

Another of Krzywinska's essays, which analyzes the first *Buffy* game, observes that the game is organized in a linear way, the gaming destiny being predetermined by the game's infrastructure (“Playing Buffy”). For Krzywinska, the game's attraction does not lie in interacting with the Buffyverse or in creating a part of it, but it rather comes from entering a pre-imagined world, i.e. the player's favorite TV show, and trying to live up to the heroic status of its avatar, to be like Buffy (“Playing Buffy”). However, quite to the contrary of this argumentation, the advertising strategy used for the second *Buffy* game, *Chaos Bleeds*, promised users a role in the game's action and, thus, it offered a chance to literally play the Buffyverse. To be sure, *Chaos Bleeds* enables the player to roam around Sunnydale and its vicinity, stake ready at hand, and thus conveys a sense of interactive freedom. Yet, whenever the player tries to open the door to a room whose exploration would not advance the quest, s/he will find it locked with no key available.<sup>7</sup> By dictating the route the avatar has to take, the game's internal machine takes control and leaves no room for detours that would alter the narrative. Possible passages thus become literally *impassable*, and the puzzles and riddles within the game exist merely as beads on a linear string. Neatly concatenated cutscenes further add to the impression of an underlying linearity that prevents the player from fully interacting with the game's storyline. When there is no problem to be solved, players find themselves watching alongside the avatar, the events that unfold on the screen and advance the plot. Every structural device within the game works towards accomplishing the final goal; the only interaction possible becomes the speed, and thus the ability, with which the player is able to succeed along pre-defined lines.

Is interactivity in the *Buffy* games, then, only a marketing strategy? As far as that kind of interactivity which interferes with the game's internal structure and promises the death of the author is concerned, the answer would be yes. If the term “Buffyverse,” however, is understood as the entirety of constructs such as genre and gender ideologies, as well as agency transported from the fictional universe of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the game offers an instance of cross-media interactivity. Being able to control not only the Slayer herself, but, depending on the level, also various other characters from the TV series (Faith, Spike, Willow, Xander, and Sid, a demon-hunter whose soul is trapped in a ventriloquist's dummy and who featured in episode 1/09, “The Puppet Show”), the player is fully immersed in the subversive qualities of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* both in terms of Gothic conventions and as far as gameplay and gender ideologies are concerned.

## Instances of Cross-Media Interactivity in *Chaos Bleeds*

The opposition of game-producer, who *pre-defines* the game's storyline, and game-player, who *plays* the game's storyline, is reflected within the narrative structure of *Chaos Bleeds* itself. After some introductory and training levels, the game starts under the narrative control of Ethan Rayne, a worshipper of the Lords of Chaos, the show's conception of evil underworldly gods, who after his first appearance in episode 2/06, "Halloween" returned frequently to cause havoc in Sunnydale. In *Chaos Bleeds*, he has enlisted Buffy and her friends as his champions — or should I say avatars? — in a contest with The First. Relying once more on the tried-and-tested concept of an alternate universe so popular in the TV series, the game's storyline then transports the group one by one into a parallel world. This parallel world is "The First's own dimension, [in which] it controls everything" (Level 5, "Downtown Sunnydale") — and from which Buffy and her friends have, according to Ethan Rayne, no chance of escape. Having enlisted Buffy's group of five as his combatants, Ethan Rayne sees himself as the author of his combat with The First. Buffy and her friends seemingly have no opportunity to object, just like a TV audience has no choice but to follow the story. This emphasis on (narrative) control without alternatives for the avatars within the storyline of the game echoes the idea of horror fiction as being especially suited for video games due to the level of immersion — as opposed to interactivity — offered by horror video games (Rouse 17, 20). The player is, as the avatars indeed literally are, sucked into the *experience* of the game instead of actually creating this experience.

Yet, *Chaos Bleeds* is exactly not just another TV episode. It is a stand-alone video game, and, in Buffy's words, "[m]aybe there is a choice" (Level 5, "Downtown Sunnydale"). As the player learns in several cutscenes, there indeed is a loophole in the form of Hope's Dagger, which was forged by Cassandra Rayne, warrior-woman-by-trade who once almost defeated The First but who was at the last moment dismembered by her adversary. In order to be a match for The First in his own dimension, the help of Cassandra is needed, and Buffy and her friends set out to retrieve the parts of her remains in order to re-assemble her body. With Buffy and her friends trying to change the outcome of their adventure, the player becomes absorbed into their quest due to being in charge of the controller and thus of the avatar. It is the player who finds the key to different puzzles and who opens the doors. The player's every motion lets the avatar succeed or fail, and although the different avatars fight for the remains of Cassandra Rayne on the screen, it is really the player who recovers her different body parts through gameplay. Thus, narrative control of the game is wrested from Ethan Rayne/The First and handed to the

avatars/the player. "[T]he sodding flesh puzzle" of Cassandra's body is at once a symbol for the avatars' taking control and for the players' constructing the principles of Gothic and gender (Level 12, "The First's Lair").

Cassandra herself is portrayed as a blonde woman in virtually shining armor during her re-membering ceremony, as the places at which her severed limbs reconnect to her body emit a bright glow. It is noteworthy here that the most important part of Cassandra's body are her eyes, which are illuminated by the very last rays of light. Although visually in line with the piercing and demonic eyes of the Gothic villain, they are nevertheless contrasted with that epitome of patriarchal power in classic Gothic fiction. They have to be retrieved first in order to open the gateway to other game levels. The emphasis is hence on the *female* gaze and the window to *her* soul.

Further stress is laid on Cassandra's soul when the group arrives at The First's lair. She herself is not able to continue her quest against The First, for she is "but a lost soul, and can no longer wield Hope's Dagger" (Level 12, "The First's Lair"). The corporeality that once had determined her whole being had been taken away by her dismembering. Despite the fact that her body has been mutilated and literally re-constructed, Cassandra no longer represents the female body as determined by a male cultural discourse — much as in the final TV episode the purpose and role of the Slayer is appropriated and redefined. By incorporating Cassandra Rayne, and, more precisely, her corpse, as a driving force into the storyline, the game once again calls attention to the motif of the warrior woman, her pure body, and its legitimacy — contrasting it with Kristeva's abject and the adolescent Gothic body "in which things which should be kept inside are always pressing to and out of the surface" as suggested in the very title of *Chaos Bleeds* (Punter 150).

Cassandra's character shows the failure of the traditional concept of the virgin heroine of the good. Although she remained in the role she was cast and adhered to the idea she personified, she did not succeed. Her untainted virgin body was violated by The First, and the bad boy of the game, Ethan Rayne, is of her family line. Whereas she was "a soldier of light," Ethan is a worshipper of chaos, representing an unworthy successor to Cassandra (Level 12, "The First's Lair"). The immaculate woman in white armor is a prevalent image used by men in male discourses, but it presents itself as obsolete in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The woman who embodied this dated idea, Cassandra, is, technically speaking, dead. Cassandra died while fighting the forces of darkness on behalf of the powers of good, leaving no heir. Thus, a new kind of female warrior has to take her place: the Slayer in the guise of Buffy. Not a mere concept like Cassandra, who is re-membered only as the image of an idea long dead, Buffy stands as an individual. For example, the Buffy avatar quite clearly bears the features of Sarah Michelle Gellar, who also



appears as figurehead in the opening credits of the game. Even though this is certainly a matter of brand recognition, it nevertheless contrasts sharply with the image of Cassandra's strikingly symmetrical and nondescript face. This shows that the kind of gender concept embodied by Cassandra is decidedly not part of the brand called Buffy.

Even though Buffy, like Faith, does not comply with established images of female heroes, her status as slayer not only equates her lack of virginity and her non-capacity to function as arbitrarily interchangeable icon of male fantasy, but it even marks her superiority:

CASSANDRA. Only one who is worthy may wield [Hope's Dagger].

FAITH. You don't gotta be a virgin or anything, right? Cuz that could be a problem.

CASSANDRA. No.... [I]t should be a Champion of the Powers. There are no Champions present, but a Slayer will *more than suffice* [Level 12, "The First's Lair," emphasis added].

And it is Buffy rather than Cassandra who survives and eventually attains what Cassandra could not accomplish, as she scatters the evil inherent in The First (and appearing on stage as Ethan Rayne) across all dimensions and levels — only to face it again (in another case of cross-media encounter) in season seven of the TV series. There, the different strands developed by the original authors and constructed through play by the players in *Chaos Bleeds* are brought together and the gender ideologies present in the Buffyverse are returned to their Gothic origins: as within the storyline of *Chaos Bleeds*, the rules of the game are changed by Buffy and her friends, empowering the Gothic heroine against the (undying?) villainy of patriarchy.

## Conclusion

By falling back on the rather open structures of alternate-dimension concepts,<sup>8</sup> *Chaos Bleeds* not only offers a neat explanation for the empowerment of the player, as well as the (quite frequent) death of the avatar, but it also opens the doors to an experience of cross-media interactivity that goes beyond both a cross-media franchise and a story told across different media. The cross-media interactivity of *Chaos Bleeds* and its part in the mosaic of the Buffyverse is rather a matter of experiencing, playing, and thus constructing through play issues of narrative agency as well as of gender ideologies and the Gothic. It is the player who retrieves the body parts of the outdated female warrior and thus plays a first-hand experience of Buffy feminism. The traditionally passive heroine of the Gothic and of horror fiction is transformed into an agent of her fate through the agency of the player. This played con-



struction of Buffy feminism is also present when the player deconstructs the male gaze: Cassandra Rayne's eyes are the first part of her body that needs to be found and they are the key to the following levels of *Chaos Bleeds*. This stress on the female gaze is first encountered by the player in the game's perspective, which functions as a remediation of the cinematic gaze. Whereas *Chaos Bleeds* is mainly played in a third-person perspective, thus *gazing at* both male and female avatars, the perspective shifts to a first-person perspective when shooting, thus allowing the player to *gaze as* both male and female avatar. At the same time, the player constantly plays out issues of narrativity and interactivity in video games and constructs the very idea of *interinactivity*. It is again the player who is responsible for letting the avatars face the passivity of the audience after having successfully completed level four. Without the player's success, the avatars would not have been transported to The First's dimension and would not have been left without a choice within the plot of *Chaos Bleeds*. Yet the linear storyline devised by the authors of the game lets the player, after long hours of play, achieve a point within the story at which the avatars take over. In this, they challenge Ethan Rayne's position of omniscient narrator of their fate and instead hand over control to themselves and thus the player.

On yet another level, however, the player's ability to interact with the game's internal structure indeed has quite a profound effect, as the better the player fares during the gameplay action, the more goodies s/he unlocks. Depending on the number of enemies slain and the number of secrets found in every level, the player is rewarded a prize. Among the extras which can be unlocked are interviews with cast members, their voice-overs, outtakes, and a slideshow of the Dark Horse comic on which the game's story is based in yet another cross-media instance. Other additional features include both characters and arenas for "multi-slayer" mode, for which the respective level needs to be completed with the player's gaining either "Professional" or "Slayer" rating. Once the player has completed every mission with the best rating possible, the game-DVD finally transforms into a fully-fledged film-DVD complete with menus and thumbnails of the different extras unlocked by the player, spanning the game's cross-medial kith and kin from read-only comic to film-like outtakes.

In the end, after the player has ostensibly "authored" the DVD, as well as interactively constructed both the de-Gothicized gender ideologies of the Buffyverse and the question of narrativity and linearity in video games through gameplay, there is only one thing left: the last avatars that can be unlocked by finishing level twelve with a rating of "Professional" and "Slayer" are series' creator Joss Whedon and Mutant Enemy boss Chris Buchanan, respectively. If the player indeed chooses the avatar of Joss Whedon as the favored champion

in “multi-slayer” mode, s/he will, due to his status as a mere powerless human faced with the strength of demonic avatars, finally indeed accomplish the death of the author.

### NOTES

1. After its fifth season, the series transferred to United Paramount Network for its final two seasons.

2. Not included here are those games which were exclusively designed for portable game consoles such as the Nintendo DS.

3. A discussion of theories equivalent to Jenkins’s and Dena’s concepts is beyond the scope of this paper but can be found in detail in Dena, “Transmedia Practice” and Dena, “Beyond Multimedia.”

4. See, e.g., episodes 1/03, “The Witch,” 1/06, “The Pack,” 1/r11, “Out of Mind, out of Sight,” 2/11, “Ted,” 2/14, “Innocence,” or 5/06, “Family.”

5. For a discussion of the heroine in horror films, see Williams.

6. A number of essays in Bernard Perron’s collection *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* deal with the pitfalls of immersion and interactivity in light of Gothic conventions.

7. Doors that can be opened with the help of a key are distinguished from those that cannot by the avatar’s remarks: “Apparently, not the way” and “Mom always said my natural charisma would open doors. Just — not this one” in contrast to “[i]t’s locked — I’ll need to find the key that opens it.” Unless otherwise indicated, citations refer to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* 2003. Due to the game’s internal machine, a fixed set of comments is used throughout the game in random order, varying from one gaming session to the next, a fact conventional citation guidelines do not account for. Whenever possible, i.e., whenever I refer to pre-determined cutscenes, I will add level titles and numbers.

8. The game actually acknowledges its debt to episodes 3/09 and 3/14, “The Wish” and “Doppelgängerland” [sic], respectively, in level four, when Giles and Anya have a conversation on the theory of an alternate-dimension Kakistos: “I’m sure you haven’t forgotten the visit we had from Willow’s vampiric doppelgänger. We owe that wonderful brush with alternate dimensions to Anya.”

## CHAPTER 2

# Dead Eye: The Spectacle of Torture Porn in *Dead Rising*

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DEBORAH MELLAMPHY

In February 2008, George A. Romero filed a lawsuit against Japanese video game developer and publisher Capcom for copyright infringement. This action followed a lengthy trademark dispute that alleged Capcom's video game *Dead Rising* (Dir. Yoshinori Kawano, 2006), released exclusively for the Xbox 360, borrowed both narrative and aesthetic concepts from the loose confederacy of his *Night of the Living Dead* series of zombie films, particularly the 1978 *Dawn of the Dead* and its 2004 remake. The MKR Group, who owns the rights to Romero's films, listed several similarities between the film and the game including "The mall has a gun shop, in which action takes place.... Both works are set in motion by a helicopter that takes the lead characters to a mall besieged by zombies.... Many of the zombies wear plaid shirts ... [and] both works feature the creative use of items such as propane tanks, chainsaws and vehicles to kill zombies" (Sinclair). Capcom responded that the premise of humans battling zombies in the setting of a shopping mall is a "wholly unprotectable idea," and they then proceeded to publish a disclaimer on the front cover of the video game that read, "This game was not developed, approved or licensed by the owners or creators of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*" (Gardner). The case was eventually dismissed in October 2008, as United States Judge Richard Seeborg found that the MKR Group had "not identified any similarity between *Dead Rising* and any *protected* element of *Dawn of the Dead*" (Sinclair, emphasis in original).

The case serves to illustrate the simultaneously uneasy and yet close relationship between cinema and gaming. Indeed, nowhere is this more apparent than in the similarities between the modern horror film — its torture porn

subgenre in particular (which has been exclusively thought to be a cinematic phenomenon, as the term continues to only be applied to film)—and the “survival horror” sub-genre of video games. The phrase “torture porn” was coined by David Edelstein in a 2006 article for *New York Magazine* entitled “Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn.” Edelstein discusses the release of Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2005) and specifies that a visceral impact achieved through graphic images of extreme cruelty and sadism is the central feature of torture porn. Describing an example of this type of cruelty from Rob Zombie’s *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), he writes:

Crazed mass murderers take a group of touring musicians hostage before slaughtering them all. Well, one of the women isn’t exactly slaughtered: She’s left hanging in the doorway wearing her lover’s detached face; she ends up running into the road, where a semi turns her into multiple heaps of gleaming innards [1].

Similarly, Scott Collura argues that torture porn is “a particular brand of terror flick that emphasizes not just gore and bloodletting (which, after all, have been mainstays of horror movies for decades now) but seemingly realistic acts of maiming and murder, often with a focus on torture and sadism” (1). The result is a subgenre of horror film more brutal and graphic than others, perhaps more akin to *giallo*, an Italian subgenre noted for its excessive murder sequences, that blends elements of horror, thriller, eroticism, and slashers, and which is known for its violence and typically features psychopathic killers who stalk and kill their victims. The torture porn label has also been applied to other films such as the *Saw* series (2004–2010), *Wolf Creek* (2005), *Captivity* (2007), the remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), *The Tortured* (2010), and the highly-controversial *A Serbian Film* (2010)—all of which demonstrate a mainstream fascination with images of torture and the suffering body, as well as a contemporary complicity with such violence. This sort of violence also permeates video games; in fact, this kind of violence is one of things that raises the most concern around video games. It also and more importantly demonstrates aesthetics and narrative connections between contemporary film and the video game.

This chapter will discuss *Dead Rising*,<sup>1</sup> a game which, since its release in 2006, has become an Xbox “Platinum Hit”—a designation reserved for games that have sold a large number of copies within nine months of their release.<sup>2</sup> It will identify and elucidate the aesthetic and narrative aspects that mark the video game as torture porn, while arguing that the game—both specifically and as a media—complicates definitions of the genre as it draws greater attention to the spectator and his/her place(s) and role(s) in and around the text. Considering spectatorship via the video game manifestation of the genre also clarifies the vital differences in interactivity between films and video games,



enabling more nuanced discussion of the differing roles and positions taken up by the spectator/player in relation to each medium. Ultimately, the examination will show that violence in cinema involves a different type of gaze than violence in video games. It is this difference that demands video game players perform a more active role in constructing violence; in playing the genre — rather than observing it — gamers must consciously seek or create their own violent spectacles, the latter of which may even be the primary appeal of the game

### Blood on Your Face: Torture Porn, Spectatorship, and Violence

A number of critics argue that the cultural shift towards a more violent form of entertainment occurred as an indirect result of the reception of the events of 9/11 and the Bush administration's response to the crisis, thus directly correlating our everyday social fears with cinematic and cultural content and concerns.<sup>3</sup> It is widely-believed that the anxieties that permeate the everyday lives of people, particularly of the Western world and especially in the United States in recent years, inevitably and eventually become manifest in popular art forms. Wheeler Winston Dixon relates the palpable sense of collective trauma in post 9/11 American society to cinema and popular culture, stating that "Something *has* been lost in the aftermath of 9/11; the reality of destruction and physical violence has been made concrete and immediate.... And yet it seems that our appetite for destruction has remained intact" (24).<sup>4</sup> Rudolph M. Loewenstein argues that "gruesome fairytales, thrillers, mystery plays and horror films seem to be an institutionalised means of gratifying the ... need to encounter and to master images and experiences of death from a safe place" (37). Typically, horror films, of which torture porn is undoubtedly a sub-category, perform a cathartic social function: this is clear from the horrors of *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931), which functioned to distract audiences from their everyday worries following the Wall Street Crash in 1929 and during the American Great Depression, through to the 1970s exploitation subgenre apparent in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which acted as a distraction from U.S. anxieties, which included the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. Likewise, Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* responded to the fear and confusion experienced, not only by the American people but worldwide, as a result of the Watergate Scandal and images of the Vietnam War, through the satire of these events. The graphic and violent nature of this cinematic horror reflected and expressed the particular social anger and confusion felt in American society. Altogether, these sorts of films suggest that the more explicit the social imagery

of war, the more graphically violent and gory horror must become in order to provide a satisfactory distraction/escape for its audience.

It can be argued that there is a direct correlation between escalating violence worldwide and its cultural representation in media images, specifically images of torture. Indeed there has been an upsurge in explicit images of violence and degradation in contemporary fiction film since the mid-2000s. The anxieties embodied have changed from the 1990s satire of horror in the *Scream* films to a more realistic form of horror that mirrors the very real horror and atrocities that audiences have ready access to today. For example, images of beheadings, genocide, and war are not only easily available to the public, but they proliferate rapidly, particularly on the internet as soldiers use mobile phone cameras and helmet cams in warzones such as Afghanistan and Iraq, and as images from Abu Ghraib and the killing fields of Sri Lanka circulate in number and without restriction. In the past number of years, popular media has fixated on extreme suffering: punishment and spectacles of inert bodies exposed to death and torture. The spectacle of death is easily accessible now. Jennifer Ashlock, a professor of sociology at Notre Dame, argues:

You have a potential to make more money with torture now because that's what actually scares a mainstream audience today ... [torture] is something that we know is going on in the world. We know about certain atrocities in Guantanamo, for example.... Because of the Internet and the global media, we know that torture is a way of life really. That information is just more accessible to us [quoted in Collura 1].

Ashlock makes it clear that torture was part of everyday life under the Bush administration and that audiences not only had to accept that it was occurring but they also became more accustomed to watching it, perhaps, I argue, even becoming somewhat desensitized to it.

The key, according to Dean Lockwood, to distinguishing torture porn from earlier horror, "seems to be about explicitness and a wider, more mainstream appetite for graphic and increasingly realistic spectacles of suffering bodies" (41). Torture porn is inherently bound up with spectatorship as the image becomes paramount, as torture porn directly addresses and acknowledges an audience and draws attention to itself as a constructed, artificial representation, making spectators acutely aware of their position as viewers.

The name of the genre simply demonstrates how torture can be "intended to serve as [a] focal point for the viewer's pleasure" similar to the way in which the female body is displayed as spectacle in porn videos (Middleton 2). The spectacle of extreme horror also illustrates that these filmmakers know that they are catering to a knowing audience that craves these types of images. This is often self-reflexively referenced in the films through the surveillance technology that features heavily in the films as the killers watch their victims.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of this equipment and this type of spectatorship acknowledges the audience and tests how much the audience can take. Torture porn is inherently a “cinema of attractions” that exists exclusively for the purpose of providing a spectacle for its audience (Gunning 41).

Tom Gunning’s “Now You See it, Now You Don’t: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions” addresses the importance of visual sensation in relation to early cinema (46). The term “attraction” is borrowed from Sergei Eisenstein’s essay “The Montage of Film Attractions,” in which Eisenstein stresses the “definite effect [of images] on the attention and emotions of the audience” (25). Eisenstein coined the term in relation to the roller-coaster ride and fairground attraction, as it destabilized and shocked participants and audiences, much like early cinema itself. In such a cinema, visual spectacle — rather than narrative or characterization — is foregrounded, thereby actively addressing the role of the spectator and implicating actual spectators in the storyworld in a very specific manner by acknowledging their presence and their involvement in the action. Significantly, Gunning goes on to examine the effect that the cinema of attractions has on temporality and argues that, in such films, time stands still as opposed to classical cinema in which time is acutely attached to linear narrative progression (48–49). He suggests the attraction or spectacle is a sudden burst of presence, is based on temporal interruption, and does not involve any linear development. By comparison, in her discussion of the attraction, Linda Williams discusses the return to visceral sensation and the theme park-like quality of contemporary cinema, arguing that contemporary films feature spectacles that are not simply used to shock the audience momentarily, as was the case in Eisenstein’s and Gunning’s attractions, but to induce a kind of trance-like state that presents a continuous ride as well as numerous shocks over a sustained period of time. In this, she argues, audiences take pleasure in losing mastery, control, and the forward momentum associated with classical narrative cinema.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary torture porn operates much the same way in its often continuous reliance on shocking imagery that focuses on the suffering body.

This type of spectatorship undoubtedly has moral implications for its viewers, and for this reason, the position of the spectator has been much debated. For example, Will Self discusses this “moral displacement” of modern cinema. Taking the example of the infamous scene in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) in which Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen) cuts off a bound policeman’s ear, Self has argued:

We lose sight of whose exact POV we are inhabiting. The sadist who is doing the torturing? The policeman? The incapacitated accomplice? It is this vacillation in POV that forces the sinister card of complicity upon the viewer. For in such a situation the auteur is either abdicating — or more likely *foisting* —



the moral responsibility for what is being depicted onscreen from himself to the viewer [quoted in Edelstein 2].

In the case of torture porn, it can be argued that, even when the audience does not view the damaged body directly through the eyes of the killer in first person, the graphic, extreme close-ups of open wounds and exposed chest cavities place viewers in the spectatorial position of the killer as they look over the victim and watch his/her intense suffering, dying moments, or dead body, and derive pleasure from or fascination with it. The discussion of the viewing position of the spectator is significant because the traditional shot-reverse-shot dynamic of cinema allows the onscreen figure to become the owner, or possessor, of the look and the cinema spectator identifies with this gaze. The cinematic apparatus necessitates that the spectator is willing "to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to 'stand in' for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees. The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, 'Yes, that's me,' or 'That's what I see'" (Silverman 205).

The operation manifests in the sort of ubiquitous horror scene in which the killer approaches the victim, with the intent to kidnap or kill. In these instances the audience can shout at the screen, but they are ultimately helpless to do anything, thus, illustrating the passive position of "audience." No matter what perspective an audience member occupies, s/he remains physically inactive and external to the diegesis, regardless of the techniques (such as first-person point-of-view shots) used by the filmmaker to create the illusion of being immersed in the story. Despite the various psychoanalytical discussions of spectatorship that argue that the audience is sutured successfully into a cinematic discourse, the relationship of the spectator to the screen remains only an illusion of unity.<sup>7</sup> This is illustrated by the fact that spectators view images that they have no authority to control, and despite structures that may encourage audience identification with certain character(s) or situations, audience members lack agency as they remain passive, manipulated subjects, who are unable themselves to affect the screen or its discourses.

The relationship between the spectator and screen changes dramatically, however, in the case of video games. Bob Rehak attributes the difference to the nature and operational mechanics of the media themselves:

The game apparatus — a software engine that renders three-dimensional spaces from an embodied perspective, directed in real time by players through the physical interface — achieves what the cinematic apparatus cannot: a sense of literal presence, and a newly participatory role, for the viewer.... The disavowal necessary to gameplay is like the "Yes, that's what I see" of successful cinematic suture, but goes further: "Yes, that's what I *do*" [121].



The effect of the mechanics is that, in games, the spectator's gaze becomes less passive as the spectator becomes a more active participant in the spectacle and narrative. In the detailed description of torture porn manifest and enacted in games, the section that follows not only illustrates the shift but highlights the significance of video games' emphasis on involved spectators in terms of thinking about the genre more broadly.

## Capturing Hell: Photography in *Dead Rising*

*Dead Rising* plays on a contemporary audience's fascination with torture porn images associated with the body and its punishment, and more significantly, it places spectatorship at the center of both the narrative and gameplay.<sup>8</sup> As Bob Rehak argues, "If the pleasures of the video game stem as much from avatarial 'reflection' as from narrative and strategic engagement with its diegesis, then spectatorship is clearly central to the form" (118). Spectatorship is made central to the game from the outset because, vitally, the game's main character and player's avatar is freelance photojournalist Frank West, who is investigating why the town of Willamette, Colorado has been sealed off by the National Guard. Following an anonymous tip, Frank travels to a shopping mall in the center of the town and arranges to be collected by helicopter 72 hours later, confident that he will have uncovered the mystery and will have gathered enough photographic evidence of the secret that the National Guard is attempting to hide. The gamer first sees Frank on the helicopter with a camera to his eye taking photographs of the town below. The game's opening sequence exploits both the player's and the imagined spectator's relationship with the camera, as the cutscene orients the game through the first-person perspective of Frank on the helicopter as it flies above the city.

The game then proceeds to foreground the important role spectatorship and its control play in and to the game as gameplay begins and the player takes control of Frank's camera and its gaze. The helicopter pilot occasionally instructs Frank and the player where to look, but players are free to disregard his instructions, and they are free to zoom in and out on anything on the ground, creating a more active, realistic gaze. While Frank's conversation with the helicopter pilot instructs the player that it is Frank's goal to take photographic evidence of everything he sees on his journey, the player is more-or-less free to decide where to focus the camera's gaze and what is important to capture on film. All in all, the sequence introduces Frank (and the player) to the apocalyptic spectacle of a zombie takeover, including dramatic scenes in which groups of zombies do things like attack a car and a bus.

As the sequence progresses, the drama heightens, and players (and Frank)

witness events such as a gas station exploding, while the game encourages taking pictures of the traumatic, gory aftermath. In fact, in perhaps the most significant moment in this opening sequence — the moment that introduces one of the game's central goals in terms of spectatorship — the helicopter hovers over a factory rooftop where a lone woman fires a gun at a group of approaching zombies. She looks directly at the camera and begins to jump and wave at the helicopter but is knocked from the roof by a zombie. If the player witnesses this event (i.e., had the camera fixed in the right place at the right time), and if the player also takes a photograph of the woman's body as it hits the ground spattering blood on impact, the player earns prestige points. The moment — along with the game's rules for earning "prestige points" — reveals the game's ties to the torture porn genre. For, the game holds such images as "perfect," rewarding the player with points and reveling in the voyeurism, gore, and drama central to the genre.

The game's prestige points, a form of experience points, are key to progressing through the game, as they are used to increase Frank's energy meter as well as expand the number and kind of objects that he can carry at any one time. As noted, the points are earned by taking graphic photographs. Significantly, though, all forms of "graphic" are not the same in the game; photographs fall, according to the game's labels, within six categories: horror (general photographs of zombies, the most common category of photograph), drama (images of psychopaths, who act as level bosses), erotica (sexualized images such as photographs of female zombies' lingerie), brutality (the most violent images in the game and the images that closest resemble torture porn), outtake (humorous images such as when zombies slip or fall down stairs), and no genre (general photographs for example capturing zombies in front of shop signs or other interesting landmarks). While extra points are awarded for mixing genres and for how close and how central the subjects are (thereby rewarding the player's photography skills), the number of points earned by photographs, as well as Frank's comments as the player takes the photographs (the gorier and more violent the picture, the more excited Frank sounds) makes it clear that the game wants players to capture the most gruesome and dramatic images possible, thereby encouraging players to create violent and gory images, to become an active maker of such images — if not of violence and gore itself. In these mechanics of play, in the player's/spectator's interaction with what is seen (i.e., choosing what to see and choosing which pictures to take, seeking out violence and gore in response to the game's encouragement to do so), the player becomes an active participant in the level and nature of the gore and violence that is featured in the game. This is quite different than the kind of spectatorship inherent in merely watching such things as they are dictated in a film text.

Frank's profession and his possession of a camera put an even finer point on the contemporary player's fascination with images of the dying or dead body embodied by torture porn as a genre. But, it also speaks to our contemporary fascination with first-person experience and the proliferation of non-professional videos of various natural disasters and events. In times of crisis and disaster, such as 9/11, the London bombings on July 7, 2005, massive tsunamis, and earthquakes, many have come to rely on first-hand subjective perspectives, shot non-professionally and instinctively on video cameras and on camera phones. A contemporary audience has become accustomed to experiencing these disasters and events on news programming through the lens of non-professional cameras. This mediation of the disaster has been exploited in the last number of years in films including *Cloverfield* (2008), *[Rec]* (2007), *[Rec]2* (2009), and countless combat and survival horror first-person shooter video games such as *Bioshock* (2007), *Killzone 2* (2009) and the *Call of Duty* series (2003–2011). The cutscenes in *Dead Rising* likewise offer this aesthetic; whether from Frank's perspective or not, the images are shaky, mimicking the movement of a handheld camera, and offer the exact gaze that we have become familiar with during times of disaster and conflict. In this, the cutscenes exploit the audience's experience of real images of disaster, while they simultaneously emphasize the player's position as spectator, for as cutscenes they seize narrative and visual control over the game (taking control or the illusion of it, momentarily, away from the player).

## Shopping Maul: *Dead Rising's* Open World

Extending the game's literal and symbolic use of the camera, as well as its point-of-view positioning of the player, the game's open world structure clarifies and illuminates the video game media's dialogic relationship to the torture porn genre. While torture porn video games showcase the conventions of the genre, they highlight and perhaps expose the ways in which the genre's emphasis on the spectacle and the spectator may implicate the viewer/player in the genre's violence. For example, like the player's freedom to aim the camera and take (or not) pictures of what s/he will, the player is free to explore the virtual world, to interact with it, and to pick up almost anything and use it as a weapon against the zombies and the psychopaths, thus encouraging players to experiment with items to achieve the most graphic (and often the most humorous) images.

In addition to encouraging the player to find images without help from Frank, the game invites players to create their own images of brutality by allowing them, in one of the more notable features of the game, to beat, pummel,



and smash zombie bodies to a pulp using of a wide range of different weapons. Over the course of the game, players acquire increasingly powerful skills (such as the power to disembowel achieved at level 50) and access to increasingly powerful weapons (such as chainsaws, swords, knives, axes, and lawnmowers<sup>9</sup>) that can be used to behead, dismember, liquefy, or otherwise turn zombies into large pools of blood, bone, brain and muscle, but everyday objects can also be used to create gory images. For example, while a player who obtains a sword can slice zombies (and others) in two, cut off limbs, and/or behead, a shower head jammed into a zombie's head results in blood showering from its body. Players can likewise create (other) comic images by placing masks and various hats on zombies, or they can capture game-made comic images by snapping shots of zombies slipping, Keystone Kop-style, on the pools of vomit created after Frank drinks too much alcohol and throws up, or by taking advantage of the photo opportunities offered when the heads of all nearby zombies explode in a shower of blood in response to Frank's discovery that squashing queen bees acts as a form of zombie repellent. The freedoms offered by such open world structure has caused considerable controversy in the past — most notably in response to *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), a game in which the player can choose to play a mission whose goal is to shoot civilians in an airport. Taking things even further, in *Dead Rising*, the player not only has the freedom to kill survivors but the game encourages players to do so by awarding extra prestige points for photographs of any and all dead bodies. This extra layer of (inter)active spectatorship that emerges in relation to one of the most basic, conventional tools of visual media — the camera — makes *Dead Rising* far gorier than *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, for it implicates the spectator/player more deeply in the making of such violence as it encourages more and more kinds of killing.

As an open world — or sandbox game — that offers several different possible endings (based on the choices players make during gameplay), the game emphasizes personal choice and the effects of various sorts of choices in its very design. The level of freedom is significant and features several different endings according to the choices players make during gameplay. Thus the player can decide whether completing the game by killing zombies or completing the game by solving the mystery is more important, allowing player control over how violent the game is. A player may choose to not complete the game or its primary objectives (i.e., to solve the mystery of what caused the zombie outbreak) and s/he can even decide to forego the secondary objectives (i.e., rescuing survivors and escorting them to the safe house) or to ignore side missions (such as battling “psychopaths” including an evil clown, a large group of cult followers and a crazed butcher, all of whom act as level bosses). A player is free to spend the entire six hours of gameplay completely dedicated



to killing zombies and, in fact, "Zombie Genocide," one of the game's most difficult achievements, rewards the killing of 53,594 zombies,<sup>10</sup> thereby necessitating that the entire six hours is used to kill zombies. This freedom to either follow the linear narrative or to explore the environment in a nonlinear fashion prompts a debate about the value of and roles of narrative, interactivity, and control in both gameplay and the larger genre of torture porn, as well as raising questions about the moral implications of violence in both gaming and film.

The increased level of player agency and subjective experience is achieved in *Dead Rising* by the game's moving camera, which allows the player to adjust the angle, granting more freedom to control the gaze and the camera position. The player can transcend the frame by moving the camera 360 degrees, zooming in and out at will, thereby completely controlling the gaze. Therefore, in relation to images of torture porn, gamers appear to become much more active and perhaps accountable consumers of violent imagery as they choose whether to watch the images or to move the camera away, to zoom in or not, thereby, in a sense, becoming the author of these images. And, although the *Dead Rising* player retains the objective third-person perspective throughout the game, as opposed to the cinematic first-person examples of *Halloween* (1978) or *Friday the 13th* (1980), s/he transgresses the position of passivity to *become* the victimizer who derives pleasure from the destruction of the body, be it alive or dead. This illustrates that the gamer transcends the gaze to perform a much more active role in the game's violence, becoming directly implicated in the images of torture within the game, and problematizing the torture porn player's moral position more so than the moral position of the genre.

## Dead End

The freedom afforded to the gamer within the torture porn environment of a zombie-infested shopping mall significantly impacts the creation, consumption, and enjoyment of violent and gory imagery in video games wherein acting is privileged over viewing. The activity involved in such a game directly places the player in a position akin to that of the killer in the torture porn subgenre, for both participate in and derive pleasure from the mutilation and destruction of bodies. This locates *Dead Rising* (as well as other games that feature violent, graphic imagery including *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* [2009] and *Grand Theft Auto IV* [2008]) within the post-9/11 environment, in which the increasingly graphic and sadistic imagery acts in conjunction with its torture porn counterparts to perform a cathartic social function. Such gameplay makes active sadists of its players, but this is not necessarily a negative

thing as players, in performing a physical act, get both a sense of agency within a seemingly uncontrollable environment and a bigger thrill than horror films can provide. Oriented in terms of the Williams/Gunning/Eisenstein discussion, such games do not merely shock, but they create a sense that the spectator makes — eyes wide open and yet not uninfluenced — as well as experiences the ride. Furthermore, I suggest that the images of such games do undoubtedly harbor moral implications for the gamer, yet, because these images appear similar to the events that we have become accustomed to watching over the last number of years, these types of games and this form of gaze demonstrates the cathartic function of gaming. Therefore, violence in *Dead Rising* is recuperated, as is violence in torture porn, because these forms of media perform an essential role in modern society.

### NOTES

1. The game's sequel, *Dead Rising 2* (2010), can also be discussed in relation to torture porn.

2. There is no information available about exactly how many units a game must sell to become a "Platinum Hit."

3. See Jason Middleton, "The Subject of Torture: Regarding the Pain of Americans in *Hostel*" and Evangelos Tziallas, "Torture Porn and Surveillance Culture."

4. For further discussions of how the collective trauma of 9/11 has been both represented and allegorized in culture, see Ceylan Özcan's "Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* as a Representation of the Collective Trauma of 9/11," Dan Hassler-Forest's "From Trauma to Victim to Terrorist: Redefining Superheroes in Hollywood in Post-9/11 Hollywood," and Roger I. Simon's "Altering the 'Inner Life of the Culture': Monstrous Memory and the Persistence of 9/11."

5. The strong links between torture porn and spectatorship are outlined by Evangelos Tziallas in "Torture Porn and Surveillance Culture."

6. See also Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood."

7. See Richard Allen, *Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality*; Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space"; and Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*.

8. Due to the graphic nature of the game, it was eventually rated "M for Mature."

9. The lawnmower is also the weapon used in, and therefore may be a reference to, Peter Jackson's zombie film *Braindead* (1992), released as *Dead/Alive* in the United States.

10. While several untested theories abound, there is no proven significance to this number.

## CHAPTER 3

# Playing (with) the Western: Classical Hollywood Genres in Modern Video Games

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JASON W. BUEL

Westerns have always been roadmaps that tell viewers more about the contemporary United States than about the country as it existed in the last half of the nineteenth century. I doubt that twenty-first century Westerns will be any different.—R. Phillip Loy

Recently, classical Hollywood film genres have been revived in a wide variety of video games. Whether in Westerns like *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), gangster epics like *Grand Theft Auto* (2008), or quasi-musicals like the *Rock Band* franchise (2007), the storytelling and stylistic conventions of Hollywood genres are emerging in some of the best-selling and most critically acclaimed video games of recent years. In his seminal work on genre in American films, Barry Langford identifies Westerns, gangster sagas, and musicals as the three genres that are “of central importance in the history of genre production” (3). In particular, he writes that the Western has commonly been viewed “as a kind of master key to unlocking and understanding the most basic elements of American identity” (54). The Western also happens to be “Hollywood’s most popular and prolific genre” (Langford 56). Recently, there has also been a wave of Western video games. Games like *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), *Gun* (2005), and *High Noon* (2010) are Westerns by any definition. However, games like *Gunman Chronicles* (2000), *Darkwatch* (2005), *Oddworld: Stranger’s Wrath* (2005), *Borderlands* (2009), and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) use significant elements of the Western in combination with

other genres — particularly science fiction as is the case with the film *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011), for example. The cinematic Western's historical popularity and its continued importance as an embodiment of American identity make the genre's recent resurgence in video games all the more worthy of study.

As such, this essay argues that the invocation of classical genre films, primarily the Western, elevates games to a higher level of artistry and prestige. It does so not only by association with the classical Hollywood system but also by encouraging players to form deeper readings of the games themselves. These games encourage players to think critically about the context of the ideologies that are traditionally implicit in the Western and how such ideologies have shaped American identity. The appropriation of conventions of the classical Hollywood genre also emphasizes the narrative and representational elements of these games. In doing so, the games place themselves into an artistic tradition that predates computerized gaming altogether. The effects of the marriage are not unidirectional, though. For example, even in relatively prototypical game Westerns like *Red Dead Redemption*, significant genre revision takes place simply through the medium change from cinema to game. This shift encourages the viewer/player to critically examine the role of direct interactivity within the world of the Western, while it also demands that s/he reexamine his or her own role in participating in the reshaping of the genre.

## The Western: Genre, Ideology and Media

In order to effectively discuss the function of the Western genre in American video games, it is important to have some understanding of genre generally and, in particular, the function of the cinematic Western as a genre. Genre criticism dates back at least to Aristotle's *Poetics* (Langford 6; Aristotle 3).<sup>1</sup> Genre categorizations are widely used by scholars, popular critics, artists, and audiences alike, albeit for different purposes. Such categorizations can serve as a way of understanding cultural trends, grouping works together, and setting audience expectations, among other things. As Barry Langford writes, "Genre films by definition are collective rather than singular objects: their meanings are comprised relationally rather than in isolation" (18). This point draws attention to the way that genres function systemically to create discursive communities in which works respond to one another, either intentionally or by virtue of association. Thomas Schatz expands on this idea: "Through repeated exposure to individual genre films we come to recognize certain *types* of characters, locales, and events. We steadily accumulate a kind of narrative-cinematic *gestalt* or 'mind set' that is a structured mental image of the genre's typical activities and attitudes" (16). Ultimately, genre study can trace the his-



tory, shift, and ideological underpinnings of a conventional storyline and the iconography that accompanies it. Once a norm for any given genre is established across a set of texts, individual texts become important in the ways that they might deviate from the formula. More importantly, in instances when multiple texts deviate from the genre's norm in similar ways, one can make inferences about changes in the ideology and cultural values of the time and place in which they were produced. Such variation can be seen in the Vietnam Westerns of the 1970s, including *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Little Big Man* (1971), and *High Plains Drifter* (1972), among others. In these films, the traditionally virtuous Western hero becomes cynical, morally ambiguous, and ineffective in a direct reflection of the disillusionment of the times.

The rise of the Western formula in video games brings to light that genre deviation also takes places across media. On the one hand, the recent wave of Western video games reflects a movement toward communities of gamers taking games more seriously as a form of art on par with cinema. On the other, they illustrate ideological shifts taking place within wider American culture — specifically, at the level of the stories America tells and believes about itself. The myth of the American West as it has been developed and refined through novels, music, television, film, and even child's play has been well examined,<sup>2</sup> but Jim Kitses offers a brief synopsis: “the Western's myth has provided a national myth and global icon, a cornerstone of American identity, its roots in history and the frontier providing a unique, rich body of signs and meaning” (“Introduction” 16). Moreover, the myth of the Western hero, specifically, “has held a traditional place as one of America's oldest and most basic popular heroes” (Parks 3). Even André Bazin, one of the most influential scholars in the history of film studies, acknowledged the cinematic Western as the “American film *par excellence*,” as well as a genre perhaps on par, artistically and culturally, with the epics of ancient Greece (140, 148). Historically, the Western has been THE American story — told across a variety of print and visual media.

According to Kitses, the Western's meaning ultimately boils down to a primary ideological conflict between signifiers of the wilderness and signifiers of civilization (*Horizons West* 12). Thomas Schatz takes a similar view: “the Western depicts a world of precarious balance in which the forces of civilization and savagery are locked in a struggle for supremacy” (47). Schatz also accepts Kitses's contention that the Western's defining conflict is expressed through a series of subordinate binaries: East versus West, social order versus anarchy, humanity versus savagery, restriction versus freedom, and so on, each of which ultimately reflect the opposition of civilization and wilderness (Schatz 48; *Horizons West* 12). While the thematic appears across the media outlets

where Westerns have appeared — oral tradition, novel, theater, radio, television, and film — Western video games not only pick up on the existing binaries inherent in the genre, but they also introduce new binaries that fit within the larger conflict between wilderness and civilization. For example, video games' conventional use of both gameplay and cutscenes to develop a narrative becomes an embodiment of Kitses's master binary. The cutscene, with its predetermined structure and fixed time sequence, serves as a civilizing force over the wilderness of the gameplay, which is relatively less structured — even occasionally chaotic — and which proceeds, particularly in an open-world game, through a series of interactions within a vast, relatively unpredictable space. The rigid order of the cutscene juxtaposed with the relative freedom of gameplay can be seen even in very early Western-ish games such as *The Oregon Trail* (1971). There, gameplay segments reinforced the idea of wilderness quite directly, in fact, as the player could be attacked, robbed, or fall to disease at any moment, whereas the cutscenes imposed a great deal of order as they were largely comprised of written text with static images, a stark departure from any sense of freedom the gameplay provided. Game structures, particularly the move between cutscene and gameplay, thus offer the Western a very tidy vehicle for expression of some of its highly conventional, ideological concerns.

Although the Western's "meaning" — its representation of an ideological conflict between the wilderness and civilization — may stand at the center of all media forms of the genre and may, in fact, be most perfectly expressed in the video game manifestation, a number of formal features help make the cinematic Western distinct from Westerns in other media. Because video game storytelling, especially in its cutscenes, shares much with film, it makes sense to pay closer attention to the generic features popularized and made iconic by the cinematic Western. The cinematic Western helped cultivate and mythologize much of the imagery of the American West through presenting concrete, larger-than-life visuals: the image of the cowboy, the choreography of the gunfight, the sweeping vistas, and the horizontal expanses of desert, among others. As Langford points out, "The particular complex of history, fantasy and ideology clustered around the 'frontier myth' codified in the Western film has been assigned a central, even defining, place in the formation of American national identity and national character" (54). Westerns were also big business, as they were of central importance to the film industry from the early silent era until the 1970s (Langford 57). Simply by virtue of the number of Western films produced relative to the total number of films produced in the Hollywood system during its formative years and Golden Age, the Western becomes linked with the cinema. Even before the Western existed as a genre, imagery from the American West played a large role in film. In 1894, William

K. L. Dickinson produced a series of Western-themed films for Thomas Edison including *Buffalo Dance* and *Annie Oakley*. Video game Westerns eventually call upon this longstanding prestige of the cinematic Western as an art form and as an embodiment of American mythology.

As a medium, the video game offers an emerging structure through which to filter the existing conventions of the Western. As Bazin writes, the Western in cinema is characterized by “continuous movement” that is “inseparable from its geographical landscape” (141). These characteristics may make the genre particularly well-suited to the medium of the video game, where the player has a relatively large degree of freedom to move about and explore the landscape. Video games, of course, rely heavily on movement through the simulated space of the gameworld. The rule set governing what movements, choices, and actions are possible within the gameworld, however, becomes a complicating factor that can deepen the ideological significance of the visual iconography of the West.

### Gamifying the West: Guns, Shootouts and Interactivity

The use of imagery from the mythological American West in video games dates back at least to 1971 with the development of *The Oregon Trail*, a computer game that dramatizes westward expansion and manifest destiny. In the game, players control a group of settlers who attempt to cross the country via covered wagon, dealing with the obstacles posed by nature, disease, resource shortages, and outlaws throughout. Though the figure of the gunfighter is absent from the game, gunplay serves a significant role in the act of hunting, which becomes the player’s primary means for acquiring food. The Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium designed the game for the purpose of teaching American history to grade school students. It has been adapted to new platforms many times since, most recently an iOS version and a version developed for Facebook.

The first video game to use a microprocessor as a part of its hardware was also a Western game (Kent xii). *Gunfight* (also known as *Western Gun*) was a coin-operated arcade game released in 1975. The game was developed by the Japanese company Taito, and it was the first game that effectively opened the American market to Japanese games (Kent 64). While *Gunfight* draws heavily on images of cinematic Westerns particularly through its advertisement and cabinet art, as well as through the game itself, it also alludes to an earlier American-developed Western game. Upon being shot, the characters in *Gunfight* utter the only line of dialogue available to them: “got me” (Kohler



16). This is the same phrase uttered by the gunfighter in the coin-operated novelty game *Six Gun* after he loses a quick-draw shootout (Kent 10). It is also worth noting that in both games the gameplay takes place entirely within the context of the two-man shootout, a trope of the classical Western. Framing the game completely within the confines of the shootout effectively eschews any potential attempt to convey a narrative. Instead, the game boils the Western down to a small handful of its most recognizable iconographic features. The significance of the shootouts that take place in the game is implied only insofar as the player is familiar with other narrative tropes of the Western. The invocation of the genre allows players to draw upon their experiences with Westerns in other media in order to imagine a plausible context for the conflict within the game.

Though *Gunfight*'s graphics are basic and it has no narrative to speak of, it made significant use of the iconography and mythology of the American West. Advertisements for the game even appropriate the image of John Wayne (Kohler 19). *Gunfight* emphasizes the image of the cowboy gunfighter and, though its gameplay might be considered rather simplistic, it revolves around the shootout just like the climaxes of most Western films. Though originally developed by a Japanese company, the game was released in the U.S. through the American company Midway, which made some significant changes to it (Kent 63). Midway added cacti and stagecoaches as obstacles in the game's landscape to increase the game's replay value and make it more of a challenge. Not coincidentally, this decision also serves to incorporate more imagery of the American West. It was also thanks to Midway that the game uses a micro-processor in order to handle this added imagery, sharpen the graphics, and smooth out the motion of the figures on screen (Kent 64).

Of course, gunplay and the figure of the gunfighter are of central importance to cinematic Westerns, Western video games, and video games designed for American audiences in general. The figure of the gunfighter has been central since *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and can be seen in contemporary Western films like *Rango* (2011) and the Coen brothers' remake of *True Grit* (2010). The prevalence of gunplay in the cinematic Western is even lampooned in many films like *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *The Quick and the Dead* (1995). As Jane Tompkins observes, "death is everywhere" in Western films (24). While this holds true for many genres, Tompkins points out that death in the Western enacts a form of spiritual transcendence and that the imminence of death underwrites everything else in the story (24). Ultimately, only formalized, ritualistic violence can bring the story to its climax and resolution (Tompkins 24). Often, the violent ritual manifests itself in the form of the shootout, which is true of cinematic and video game Westerns alike.

The gunfighter is the perfect embodiment of the idea that action and



interactivity are more important than passive observation, contemplation, or rational debate. Jane Tompkins writes of the Western, "doing, not talking, is what it values" (50). It makes perfect sense, then, that the Western genre and the gunfighter in particular would make their way into video games. After all, video games are distinct from other arts in the way that they simulate action, specifically interaction within a graphically represented rule set. Since games are based around actions that progress toward a goal, the archetypal Western gunfighter suits video games perfectly.

### ***Red Dead Redemption* and the Next-Gen Western: Open Worlds and Revisionist Narratives**

*Red Dead Redemption* can be classified as an open-world (or sandbox) game in terms of its gameplay, which means that players are actively encouraged to explore and interact with elements of the gameworld that have little or no relationship to progressing through the game or through the main storyline. The player-character's interactions within this world can trigger various quests, some of which are short and self-contained, while others are components of the game's main overarching storyline. Set in a fictionalized series of towns in the American West at the turn of the twentieth century, *Red Dead Redemption* tells the story of former outlaw John Marston (the character whom players control from a third-person perspective) as he collaborates with the U.S. government to cross into Mexico and hunt down the members of his former gang. The game makes use of many traditional elements of the cinematic Western: the cowboy gunfighter hero, the six-shooter, the quick-draw shootout, the horse as a primary means of travel, an abundance of wanted posters, ghost towns that dot the landscape, and many more.

The plot and game objectives draw heavily from revisionist Western films in particular. The game's main storyline of traveling into Mexico to hunt down members of one's former gang is directly and heavily inspired by *The Wild Bunch* (1969). The game revises the Western genre through the very fact that it presents a storyline that closely resembles many cinematic Westerns but does so through the medium of the video game. It is also a revisionist Western in terms of its narrative genre as it romanticizes the West and views it nostalgically, but it is also important that it is set at a time when the signifiers of the American Western frontier were falling by the wayside in the name of progress and industrialization. The audience is encouraged to take a critical look at the underlying ideologies of the American West mythology of power and entitlement, particularly the dangerous cycles of heroic masculinity passed inadvertently from the protagonist, John, to his son, Jack. This notion of

heroic masculinity is tied in with the larger idea of the personal code of honor as a force that guides the hero's action over the course of most Western films.

Revisionist Westerns often continue the use of the personal code of honor as a primary motivation for the protagonist. They often differ from classical Westerns, however, in that the protagonist's code of honor often leads him (rarely her) to justify and commit acts of vengeance (Schatz 57). This vengeful code of honor appears in *Red Dead Redemption* and is the driving force behind the gameplay itself as well as the storyline: The U.S. government blackmails John into hunting down the remaining members of his former gang. Federal agents capture him, threaten his family, and threaten to kill him if he does not comply. While John himself is not necessarily motivated by vengeance, he is compelled to enact the vengeance of a few federal agents. Near the end of the game, in a stunning scene, John is killed. The player then gains control over John's son Jack as he endeavors to get revenge on the man who ordered his father's death.

Though the game is a revisionist Western generally, it draws heavily on stylistic and narrative events from one particular revisionist Western film: *The Wild Bunch* (1969). In his review of the game, Nick Cowen describes Marston primarily through his connection to Peckinpah's film. Art director Rob Nelson expounds on the game's aesthetic influences: "if we got the action to feel close to Peckinpah levels, we would be very pleased. For us, he really changed the way gunplay is depicted in films forever, and we strive to do the same in our games" (Nelson). This quote shows a self-conscious effort on the part of the design team to create a gaming experience based heavily on the narrative and visual style of cinematic Westerns — particularly those of Sam Peckinpah. Like *The Wild Bunch*, as Cowen indicates, the rugged characters representative of the past are being displaced by civilization as represented by more modern weaponry and, eventually, the automobile. Also like *The Wild Bunch*, as Nelson indicates, *Red Dead Redemption* frequently depicts gunplay in a highly stylized manner. In particular, the game uses slow motion in cutscenes and allows players to initiate "Dead Eye" mode at any nearly any point in the game. Through dead-eye mode's effect of shifting the game into slow-motion so that the player can pick his or her targets carefully and take down many more enemies than standard real-time gameplay would allow, the game not only stylizes violence in a way that is highly reminiscent of Peckinpah's Westerns, but the game allows the player-character extra time to get well-aimed shots off, which serves a major function in terms of the gameplay as it is necessary for surviving the frequent instances when multiple gunmen attack the player-character at the same time.

Like Peckinpah's films, *Red Dead Redemption* also makes ample use of the gunfighter's potential for violence. The in-game movements at the player-

character's disposal as well as the controls are nearly identical to those in another notoriously violent game, *Grand Theft Auto IV*. The way space is mapped out is similar in both games and the structure of the gameplay is nearly identical: both games are structured around one set of main quests with optional side quests that can be completed but have self-contained narratives (i.e., no effect on the overarching narrative connected to the main quest). These similarities should come as no surprise, given that Rockstar Games developed *Red Dead Redemption* as well as all of the *Grand Theft Auto* games. They even use the same game engine, RAGE, which was developed specifically for *Red Dead Redemption* but previously popularized through its use in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Stead). That is not to suggest, however, that the choice to refine *Grand Theft Auto*'s gameplay mechanics and use them for a game that is set during the last years of the mythological American West was anything other than careful and intentional. After all, Rockstar Games has produced many titles that have few if any similarities in gameplay to these games.<sup>3</sup> The similar graphics and gameplay structures in *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Red Dead Redemption* draws a direct parallel between the violence of the mythological American West, where violence is a force of heroic masculinity and involves spiritual transcendence, and the violence in the gangster genre, where violence is enacted out of necessity and is neither romanticized nor imbued with a sense of transcendence.

Reviewers frequently praised *Grand Theft Auto* for the unprecedented sense of freedom it gave players (Frasca). *Red Dead Redemption*'s use of such similar design brings Kitses's binary of freedom versus restriction, one manifestation of the wilderness versus civilization binary, directly into its gameplay as well as its narrative. Players are relatively free to explore the vast expanses of the game's Western landscape but ultimately must give in to the restrictions of the relatively linear quests if they are to progress through either the story or the game itself. This model of open-world gameplay, which is clearly present in earlier games, takes on a great deal of additional significance and ideological weight when it is used in conjunction with the Western. Every choice the player makes — pursuing quest objectives or simply exploring the landscape — carries with it all of the connotations of the wilderness versus civilization binary. If we can assume that most players will pursue at least some quest objectives rather than simply exploring the game's vast landscape, then *Red Dead Redemption* and games like it effectively provide a set of rules that encourage players to enact processes of civilization, industrialization, and development.

*Red Dead Redemption* explores the wilderness versus civilization master binary, particularly the freedom versus restriction sub-binary, most directly through the death of its protagonist. In most games (and for most of this



game) the death of the player-character is non-diegetic: it is not actually meant to be interpreted as something that happened within the storyworld. The progression through any given video game almost always depends on a "save-try-fail-restart" sequence whereby a player reaches some sort of checkpoint (often a transition between levels or other notable change in space), attempts to accomplish a task, fails to do so, and must start over from the checkpoint (Newman 85). Games typically indicate failure by showing the death of the player-character on screen. Games usually show restart points through the character's re-spawning on screen, which is rarely if ever given any narrative weight: players have been conditioned to accept that the death(s) of the player character over the course of any given game is not part of the storyworld, since it often carries no narrative significance and only minimal significance within the gameplay (the player must go back a few steps and try again, usually not start the entire game over) (Newman 85–86). Since there is no way around getting John Marston irreversibly killed within the logic of both gameworld and storyworld, players are re-sensitized to the death of the player-character. Through the way that the game restricts its narrative (John must die), it concurrently offers a strange sort of freedom in that players are liberated, at least during this particular scene, from the confines of the conventional "save-try-fail-restart" sequence. Suddenly, the violence that has been inflicted upon the player-character matters again as it has significance within the narrative and changes the course of events in the story as well as within the gameplay (since players are forced to take control over Marston's son for one final revenge mission). This functions as a way to get players to think critically and reflect upon violence within games and within Westerns as the seemingly invincible, mythological gunslinger is eventually bested and defeated at no fault of the player.

### **Looking to the Past to Understand the Present: Implications and Conclusions**

Video games that appropriate the iconography of the American West and of the Western film in particular have been around for a long time. More recently, as video games have become increasingly interested in telling stories, Western plots have become increasingly common as well. Through their frequent direct references to cinematic Westerns as well as their continuation of a genre that has all but disappeared from the cinema, these video game Westerns attempt to place themselves into a longer tradition that is more widely seen as a true art form.

Western films say more about the values and attitudes of the time when



they were produced than anything factual about the historical American West (Schatz 46). As Schatz suggests, "These films do not celebrate the past itself, but rather our contemporary idealized version of the past, which forms the foundation and serves as the model for our present attitudes and values" (63). What does it say about our present values, then, when a genre that fundamentally deals with struggles between wilderness and civilization, between the future and the past, between industrialism and agrarianism continues its long history through the medium of video games? The continuation of the genre in video game form represents a simultaneous nostalgia for a fictional pre-industrial past. Simultaneously, it serves as an analogy for the present cultural moment, as we begin to standardize and civilize the previously much more chaotic space of the Internet. This medium, after all, has always been highly dependant on relatively advanced technology and, unlike cinematic Westerns, requires no attempt whatsoever to have or create any sort of Western environment in the actual world. Instead of being photographed and projected, the American West as it appears in any video game is a complete recreation synthesized through code, written onto a disc (or a cartridge) in a series of zeroes and ones, and played on a plastic console (or wooden, metal, and plastic cabinet). While any individual Western game is bound to have some degree of romantic nostalgia for the Old West, the high degree of technological advancement communicated through the medium itself displays the ultimate and irreversible triumph of industrialism and progress over agrarianism and tradition. As J. Hoberman writes, "The cowboy movie was typically the vehicle America used to explain itself to itself" after the Second Industrial Revolution (85). As cinematic Westerns become fewer and farther between, one wonders if the cowboy video game will become the vehicle that twenty-first century America uses for the same purpose in the Information Age.

#### NOTES

1. Like many video game critics of today, Aristotle was interested in understanding the differences between different modes of representation. He described genre categories, notably comedy, tragedy, and epic poetry, based on common formal features within each genre. Moreover, since Aristotle focused largely on mimesis, or the sort of representation through imitation that we commonly see in plays, he was interested in how such imitation functioned differently within each genre. Likewise, many video game critics and players differentiate between gameplay genres based on the genres means of imitating the physical world. For example, platform games represent their characters, obstacles, and landscapes in a far different stylistic manner from first-person shooters or survival horror games.

2. In his introduction to *Playing Cowboys*, Robert Davis offers a solid and helpful overview of this criticism.

3. Examples would include the *Max Payne* hard-boiled detective shooter series, the *Midnight Club* series of racing games, *Rockstar Games Presents Table Tennis*, and *Austin Powers: Welcome to My Underground Lair!*

## CHAPTER 4

# Game-to-Film Adaptation and How *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* Negotiates the Difference Between Player and Audience

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BEN S. BUNTING, JR.

In May 2010, Walt Disney Pictures released its feature film *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, an adaptation of Jordan Mechner's 2003 video game of same title. Despite the inclusion of A-list Hollywood talent<sup>1</sup> and the gloss conferred by its \$200 million budget,<sup>2</sup> the film received a lukewarm reception from both critics and audiences.<sup>3</sup> By Hollywood standards, its \$335 million box office take marks it as a failure (*Box Office Mojo*). Yet, when considered within the context of nearly twenty years of miserably-received game-to-film adaptations, the relatively tepid response to the film version of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* is enough to qualify it as a success.

So why did the *Sands of Time* film succeed, at least by comparison to its predecessors, where so many other game-to-film adaptations have failed? Certainly, the film's star power, large budget, and international marketing and distribution played a role. The real secret to the *SoT* adaptation's success, though, lies in something far more fundamental: namely, the movie recognizes that it is a film — and only a film; it embraces and limits itself to the conventions and boundaries of that medium. In other words, unlike most game-to-film adaptations, the *SoT* film does not attempt to reproduce the experience of being a player in a game for an audience of moviegoers. Rather, it stays true to its medium, transposing what it can from its source material and excis-

ing the rest, never losing sight of the fact that it is a piece of static exposition created for an agency-less audience and not an interactive gameworld.

Examined against each other, the two versions of *SoT* emphasize the point that telling a story to a passive audience through film and telling a story through a player's interaction with a gameworld are markedly different. That the *SoT* game and film each succeed on the terms of their own medium highlights the difference between these interactive and passive storytelling processes.<sup>4</sup> The *SoT* game's then-groundbreaking approach to interactive storytelling and its rejection of gamemakers' oft-rampant cinephilia allow it to engage in what Tadhg Kelly calls "worldmaking," a form of storytelling made possible by interactive media ("Worldmakers"). At the same time, the *SoT* film is able to borrow from the original game's source material productively without attempting to shoehorn the experience of playing a video game into a passive, narrative format. Because of this, the *SoT* film can stand on its own merits as a film while appealing to both experienced *SoT* players and a more general movie going audience.

To show how the *SoT* game and film both succeed on their own terms by acknowledging the limits and possibilities of their respective media, I will first describe what those limitations are. More specifically, I will explicate what makes video game storytelling fundamentally different than film storytelling, as the frequent conflation of both media's storytelling processes simplifies differences that are, in fact, quite important. Video games like *SoT* represent the possibility for an entirely new form of storytelling, and I believe that a better understanding of what this form looks like will enable the telling of more effective video game *and* film stories.

## Worldmaking, Intermediate Agency and the Role of Story in Video Games

The debate over the role of story in video games stands as both one of the first and the longest-lasting in game studies. "Is there a game-story?" Janet Murray asks at the onset of her essay "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama," and this question has been argued intensely in game studies since Murray herself started the debate with her 1998 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (2). Murray's concept of cyberdrama, introduced in *Hamlet*, suggests that "as the computer becomes an expressive medium," it will "tell the story of our lives ... much as the novel emerged to tell the story of a previous culture and time" (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 1). Murray sees this new form of expression being realized primarily by video games. In 2004, she wrote that "*The Sims* may be seen as the breakthrough text of cyberdrama, just as *Don Quixote*

(1605) was for the novel or *The Great Train Robbery* (1905) was for the movies" (5). Murray is fascinated by the potential of a "novel-generating system" like *The Sims*, where "the actions of the world [are] a collaborative improvisation, partly generated by the author's coding and partly triggered by the actions the interactor takes within the mechanical world" (4, 5). In "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama," Murray sketches an early version of a potential synergistic relationship between game and story, yet her likening of *The Sims* to a "novel-generating system" belies a faulty assumption: namely, that "story-telling" must equal "narrative."

Noted ludologist Espen Aarseth comes from the same frame of reference when he dismisses Murray's argument, stating that "games will be games and gamers will be gamers. Storytelling, on the other hand, still seems eminently suited to sequential formats such as books, films, and e-mails" ("Online Response" 10). A narrative, from this perspective, is necessarily linear, and thus at odds with a nonlinear video game experience such as *The Sims*. Why, though, does Aarseth assume that *all* storytelling must be sequential? He doesn't offer an explanation for this assumption, instead treating its truth as obvious. I would argue that it is anything but. Aarseth's ludologist counterpart, Markku Eskelinen, perpetuates this conflation of story and narrative. Yet, in Eskelinen's rejection of a connection between game and story, he hints at an idea that may in fact help unite the two. Using popular puzzle game *Tetris* as an example of a game that does *not* tell a story, Eskelinen argues that, "in games, the dominant temporal relation is the one between user time and event time and not the narrative one between story time and discourse time" (37). His model is meant to illustrate that "there are series and sequences of events that do not become or form stories" (37). Stories, in Eskelinen's model, are built from the relationship between story time, which he describes as "the time of the events told" and discourse time, which is "the time of the telling" (39). Games, by contrast, are made up of the relationship between "user time (the actions of the player) and event time (the happenings of the game)" (39).

While Eskelinen intends to show a basic incompatibility between game and story based on the temporal relationships that give rise to each, his work (with a few minor adjustments) also suggests the opposite: a potentially functional synthesis of game and story. What if one views the actions of the player in playing a game as a "telling" of sorts, merging user time and discourse time? And if the "time of events told" could actually be "the happenings of a game" within the gameworld? By merging the supposedly contradictory halves of Eskelinen's model, one can arrive at a theoretical situation that suggests that stories *can* occur in games if those stories are told at least in part through the actions of the player as they take place within the gameworld. Games tell stories, then, by enabling player agency and making the player an integral



part of the storytelling process while avoiding passive exposition methods like cutscenes.

Ken Perlin's concept of "intermediate agency" begins to describe more precisely what a player's actions in the gameworld can contribute to the storytelling process. In his essay "Can There Be a Form between a Game and a Story?," Perlin wonders: "If we look at 'linear narrative' and 'interactive game' as a dialectic, how can we really get into intermediate states along this dialectic?" (15). He provides his own answer by suggesting "intermediate agency," a process by which a video gameplayer is given "psychological agency ... within the interactive narrative" of the gameworld (15). Again, the narrative/story conflation rears its ugly head here, but simply replace Perlin's "narrative" with the less-linear story and we're on to something new. Perlin chooses to focus the player's interaction with his/her in-game avatar as the locus for this intermediate agency, seeking a way to "create a form in which the wall between 'my agency' and 'the agency of an entity that seems psychologically present and real to me' can be removed or blurred" (15–16). Perlin believes that if such an entity could be programmed, it "could plausibly lead to a form of creative work which is intermediate between [game and story] by enabling a psychologically present entity which is somewhere between 'me' and 'other'" (16). As fascinating as that possibility sounds, though, Perlin is the first to admit that such an avatar has yet to be created, though not for lack of trying.<sup>5</sup> For now, at least, an avatar-driven experience of intermediate agency as a storytelling mechanism is limited by our ability to program an avatar capable of such a complex relationship with the player.

Tadhg Kelly suggests a way around this with his idea of worldmaking, which offers the idea that players should be seen as co-authors of games' stories simply because they are the ones playing through the gameworlds. Kelly argues that gamemakers must "forget the *person*. The art of game design is all about the *place*" ("Worldmakers"). Frequently, gamemakers' fixation on the need to create believable avatars and characters comes from their narrative-influenced desire to generate convincing, character-driven drama within gameworlds. This fixation can even be seen in Perlin's focus on the relationship between players and their avatars. Kelly believes, however, that such a "narrativist relationship between the player and the on-screen character is wishful thinking," for drama — as we traditionally understand it — simply cannot exist in an interactive storytelling medium ("Cars, Dolls and Video Games"). "The inevitability and success of struggle in drama is built on the powerlessness of the audience, and the complete captivation of their attention," he explains; Comedy, tragedy, and other kinds of drama flow from the empathy of watching things unfold without *agency*" ("Cars, Dolls and Video Games"). Games cannot generate drama because they must, by necessity, allow the player some

degree of agency, destroying the tension that is the natural result of being a passive audience member.

A player's agency is often expressed through an avatar, as that avatar allows the player to take a role in shaping his/her particular experience of the gameworld. This is one half of the process of worldmaking. The friction between the player's enactment of their agency within the gameworld and the limiting force of that gameworld's rules create a tension not entirely unlike — though importantly different from — the drama described above. Kelly explains that “the game gives you agency to step into a world. You have control of your agency, which functions as an extension of you and nothing more, but the world is not in your control. Like a Dali painting, the world is the artistic canvass [sic] that the player can take or leave” (“Cars, Dolls and Video Games”). The creation of this canvas and the programming of the specifics of the presentation of it to the player by the gamemaker is the other half of worldmaking. The story here is thus a construction co-authored by the player and the gamemaker. What ultimately makes this shared authoring a compelling experience for the player are the rules themselves, the foundation of any game, video or otherwise.

The final piece of the worldmaking puzzle: Kelly believes that the player's experience of the gameworld “is pointless without goals, tasks, and things to do — even if those things are self-directed or game-directed. You need structure, learning opportunities and easily interpreted patterns before you can let yourself imagine and become invested” (“Worldmakers”). So, it is within the framework of such ludic rules that the player can become “psychologically present” in the gameworld. Through interaction with the gamemaker's creation, the player achieves intermediate agency, becoming something between audience and storyteller. By reconceptualizing story as the player's experience of navigating the programmed gameworld as opposed to a passive audience's viewing of a recitation of a linear narrative, we arrive at a model of storytelling-through-game that implicates the player as co-author, working within the gameworld to express intermediate agency. The player, then, is not a passive receptor of a story, but rather provides his/her own game-story as an integral part of the telling process.

### “Do It, Don't View It”: Worldmaking in *The Sands of Time*

The original *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* is an excellent example of what a worldmaking approach to storytelling can look like in practice. Rather than segregating ludic action from exposition, *SoT* melds them

together, telling a story that occurs around the player's avatar (the titular Prince) but is also directly affected by the Prince's actions. The Prince — and thus the player — is ultimately beholden to the rules and structure of the gameworld first, and the storytelling occurs against what Kelly called the "canvas." That *SoT* was different from almost all the games that had come before it in this regard was no accident. At the center of both this then-unique game and its later film adaptation was original *Prince of Persia* creator Jordan Mechner. Mechner, perhaps unsurprisingly, has some interesting ideas about interactive storytelling and the ideal relationship between game and film.

In "*The Sands of Time: Crafting a Video Game Story*," a postmortem article on the *SoT* game published in 2007, Mechner begins by discussing the difference between writing for a video game and writing for film. He explains that "A film screenplay is a clean, written blueprint ... video games have no such blueprint," acknowledging the necessity of leaving room in a game's story for each player's unique experiences within the gameworld as compared to a film story, which needs to keep an audience's attention and interest but cannot be fundamentally changed by that attention and interest (111). Like Kelly, Mechner clearly appreciates the gap between passive and interactive storytelling and his understanding manifested in two versions of *Sands of Time*, each of which embraces the strengths of its medium.

The remainder of Mechner's article is broken up into a series of rules for writing a video game story, the first and most important of which is "Do It, Don't View It" (111). This rule is at the heart of Mechner's game-writing philosophy because, through it, he acknowledges that "in a film it's better to show than to tell, [but] in a video game it's better to do than to watch" (111). Mechner warns that "Give the story's best moments to the player, and he'll never forget them. Put them in a cutscene and he'll yawn" (111). Being taken out of the worldmaking process at a critical moment robs the player of the agency that they have grown accustomed to. The way *SoT* keeps from falling into this trap is by adhering to Mechner's second rule: "Story Is Not King" (112). Rather than trying to design game mechanics that helped to tell a story, *SoT*'s world was designed in reverse: gameplay came first, and the story was adjusted appropriately. *SoT*'s gameplay is intentionally rather simplistic, consisting of three elements: "acrobatic exploration (getting from point A to point B) and combat (killing everyone you meet), plus ... you can turn back time to undo your mistakes" (112). The challenge, then, was to "invent a story that [would] fit into this gameplay, making the most of its strengths without highlighting its limitations" (112).

Thus, this tripartite gameplay ended up dictating the direction of the game's story. First, the setting is the destroyed Palace of Azad, reduced to a ruin after the Prince unleashes the titular *Sands of Time*. Navigating this



ruined landscape necessitates the use of the Prince's acrobatic skills; thus "getting from point A to point B" is not only a ludic challenge, it also makes sense within the game's story dimension. Second, save for the Prince, his Princess, and the evil vizier, all of *SoT*'s characters are turned into monsters by the unleashing of the Sands of Time. This conveniently creates a situation in which the Prince has no choice but to fight and kill everyone he meets. This allows the story dimension of *SoT* to function without requiring the creation and maintenance of dozens of extraneous characters who would ultimately just get in the way of the gameplay, which meets Mechner's third rule is "Maximize Efficiency" (113). Third, the Prince's rewind ability is conveniently powered by the newly-released Sands of Time. In addition to being a somewhat unique gameplay feature, the Prince's ability to turn back time and undo his mistakes also functions as a plausible way to explain away his occasional missteps and pitfalls within the bounds of the game's story—he survives his adventures because when he slips up, he can simply rewind back to safety.

The gameplay of *SoT* is dotted with such ludic moments that also reference the story. The effect is the complete opposite of the loss of agency engendered by the dreaded cutscene, as these moments allow the player to keep playing, and to keep writing their own game-story while forces outside the scope of their agency continue to challenge their progress through the gameworld. First and foremost, there is the game's framing voiceover. From the moment the player starts up *SoT*, the Prince's voice begins telling the story of his discovery of the Dagger of Time, his releasing of the Sands, and his eventual redemption. However, this voiceover never interferes with or stops the gameplay. In fact, the voiceover often assists the player in solving certain of the game's acrobatic puzzles. In one instance, for example, the player enters a particular chamber, causing the Prince to observe: "And there it lay, just out of reach: The Dagger of Time. There was a treasure I could carry with pride as a trophy of our victory. If only I could get there" (quoted in Mechner 116). Exposition this might be, but it is also an unsubtle hint to the player that they should be trying to reach a dagger located somewhere in the room before proceeding to the next acrobatic challenge.

*SoT*'s framing voiceover also allows the Prince to enfold basic gaming conventions like save points and the dreaded "Game Over" screen into his storytelling. When players reach a save point, they are presented with a vision of the acrobatic puzzles to come, as seen by the Prince through the magic of the Dagger of Time. The Prince collapses with the intensity of this vision, and the game goes to the save screen, where the Prince's voice asks: "Should I start my story from here next time?" Not only does this successfully roll one of the most basic ludic functions of the video game into *SoT*'s storytelling process, it also explains away the break in the action that saving represents:



the Prince collapses, and when he comes to again — when the game is done saving your progress — he continues on his quest. Likewise, when the player dies, the Prince hurriedly explains “No, no ... that didn’t happen,” and the player starts back at the most recent save point, as does the Prince’s voice-over.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, there are moments in which *SoT* acknowledges the importance of its ludic elements through the game’s story. For instance, in a bit of exposition that sets up the aforementioned acrobatic puzzles that challenge the player throughout most of the game, the Prince encounters a surviving guard deep in the bowels of the palace. When the guard requests that the Prince assist him in turning on the palace’s “defense grid” to slow down the sand monsters spreading throughout the palace grounds, the Prince obliges. Only upon the activation of the palace’s defenses does it become clear that the Prince now has to avoid those very same defenses — booby-traps, spinning saw blades and spring-loaded, flying knives — if he hopes to escape the palace alive. Perhaps the most significant way in which *SoT*’s story acknowledges that it is also a game, though, is through the relationship between the Prince and the Princess, Farah.

Princess Farah becomes the Prince’s love interest by the end of the game through a rather cliché series of plot movements. However, the player’s interaction with Farah does not primarily cast her as a passive character, or as a vehicle for exposition, but rather as a sort of computer-controlled fellow player; that is, though the Princess certainly serves a purpose in *SoT*’s story, her primary and most effective role in the game is ludic. Farah’s ludic usefulness is expressed in two ways, both tied directly to *SoT*’s three gameplay mechanics as described above by Mechner. First, she assists the Prince in combat. When Farah is in the area and the Prince must fight sand monsters, she unstrings her bow and enters the fray. That she may occasionally shoot the Prince on accident — prompting her to shout an apology — only adds to the novelty of her assistance. Many a time does Farah’s arrow drop a sand monster a step from planting its sword in the Prince’s back, and for the player, this sort of help goes much further towards engendering empathy for the Princess than any amount of emotive dialogue or exposition might.

In addition to being an asset in battle, the Princess also assists the Prince in solving puzzles and avoiding traps. There are many rooms throughout the palace that simply cannot be passed through safely without two people to correctly operate the switches and levers necessary to unlock a door or open a secret passageway. By the end of the game, Farah becomes notorious for slipping through small cracks in the palace’s walls, emerging on the other side to reach switches and levers that the Prince would otherwise be unable to get to. Again, that Farah becomes not just a character for the game’s story but

also a sort of player in her own right as she helps the Prince solve puzzles makes her an important bridge between *SoT*'s storytelling and its gameplay. The banter between Farah and the Prince regarding the convenient placement of Princess-sized cracks is another, more tongue-in-cheek way in which the game acknowledges through storytelling that it is, in fact, a game first and a story second.<sup>7</sup>

### Not "A Videogame Movie": Adapting *The Sands of Time* for Film

As Mechner makes clear, he and his design team began making *SoT* from the ground up with the maxims "Do It, Don't View It" and "Story Is Not King" in mind (111, 112). The ways in which these maxims are upheld within the resulting gameworld dissolve the separation between game and story in *SoT* and helps make it an excellent example of worldmaking. But what of the game's film adaptation? Interestingly, Mechner wrote the original screenplay for the *SoT* film adaptation, and while other Hollywood writers eventually took over his duties, revising the screenplay for Disney Studios, Mechner was credited in the final film as a writer and an executive producer. His awareness of the distinction between worldmaking and narrative shows that perhaps the best way of making a successful game-to-film adaptation is to not make it an adaptation at all. Mechner's reticence to borrow heavily from the *SoT* game for the film serves as a final example of the usefulness of distinguishing between passive and interactive storytelling media.

In various interviews, Mechner has repeatedly made it clear that from the outset, the adaptation of *SoT* to film was to be less of a traditional adaptation and more of a repurposing: "In adapting *Prince of Persia* into a screenplay I think everybody who worked on the movie — like Jerry Bruckheimer and Mike Newell — never really saw it as a videogame movie," he explains (*GameArena*). The filmmakers "set out to make a movie that would be for general audiences," and in so doing they focused on the part of *SoT*'s gameworld that could become the setting for "an old fashioned, swashbuckling, romantic adventure" (*GameArena*). Mechner sees the empathetic, complex Prince character and the unique time-bending MacGuffin of the Dagger of Time as the two parts of the original gameworld that translate well to film, but is otherwise careful to make a distinction between storytelling in games and storytelling in film — a distinction that should sound familiar by now (*GameArena*; *Sky Movies*). "When you adapt from a game to a movie," Mechner opines, "you lose the gameplay ... when you take that level of interaction away, what are you left with? To me, making a video game movie is no different

than making any other movie. The story, the characters, it needs to be a cinematic process" (*Sky Movies*).

What makes the *SoT* film different from other adaptations in Mechner's mind is that it "is the first time that a video game creator actually adapted their own game as a screen play" (Martin). Because of this, Mechner was able to bring his unique perspective to bear on the creation of the *SoT* film. The result is a film that takes place in a setting that is visually similar to the game-world of *SoT*; however, in the film the setting is merely that: a setting. It is not a stage for a player's experience of worldmaking but a backdrop for the kind of agency-less drama that Kelly argues is best relegated to more traditional expressive media, including film ("Cars, Dolls and Video Games"). Mechner shows the importance of this difference in one illustrative comparison of the game and film when he explains that:

The game kicks off with a cataclysm that basically destroys the world and turns all living creatures except for the three main characters into raging, murderous sand monsters. That was a great setup for the gameplay we had, which was "acrobatic Persian survival horror." But if you put that setup into a film, it would be a "B" movie, and that's not the kind of movie *Prince of Persia* should be. Our model is classic epic, swashbuckling action-adventure movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Zorro*, and *Thief of Baghdad*, with humor and romance and full of memorable characters. You can't get there if you turn everybody into sand monsters on page fifteen [Spry].

What results instead is a film that is somewhere between a Shakespearean struggle for a royal crown and a summer blockbuster popcorn movie.

Absent the need to accommodate the tripartite gameplay of its interactive source material, the *SoT* film's story could be changed to better suit its particular audience. First, the film version of *SoT* does not need to take place in a post-apocalyptic landscape but instead unfolds across a stylized version of ancient Persia replete with varied, visually engaging locations. Second, rather than being released at the beginning of the story, the titular Sands of Time are a distant threat that don't factor directly into the narrative until the final act, leaving the film's world populated by various secondary characters (as opposed to zombies and monsters) and providing the opportunity for more involved subplots, lengthier dialogue, and more thorough spoken exposition. Third, the rewind mechanic of the gameplays a small but clever role in the film's dramatic arc rather than functioning as an oft-used tool that enables the Prince's survival, fulfilling a role that is less ludic mechanism and more classic adventure film MacGuffin.

The film, then, ultimately owes little to its source material save for its Persian setting, the banter between the Prince and the Princess, and the Dagger of Time. The film *does* follow the Prince through a number of parkour-style

setpieces meant to allude to the acrobatic action of the *SoT* game, and many of the visual details of the film's sets are evocative of the graphics of the game. However, these details are better described as homages — in-jokes for fans of the game come to see the film — than attempts to retell an *SoT* player's game-story in film form. As Mechner states, gameplay is "the one aspect of the game that doesn't translate to film. No matter how you do it, you are never going to have that attractive element and things that are fun to play are not necessarily fun to watch an actor doing on screen" (Martin). Accordingly, then, in much the same way that the *SoT* game merges the player's acrobatics with the rest of the gameworld, the *SoT* film frames its parkour sequences as eye-candy that exists for the purposes of advancing the narrative and titillating the audience, not as a hollow attempt to reenact a player's experience of worldmaking.

Much of the success of both the *SoT* game and its film adaptation emerges from Mechner's awareness of the fundamental difference between interactive and passive storytelling. That the *SoT* film adaptation attempted to draw only the barest of inspiration from its source is not a weakness, but rather an acknowledgment of how different the media of video games and film are when it comes to storytelling. The film's success against a history of game-to-film failures bears out Mechner's belief that "[copying] the game story bit by bit ... wouldn't have made such a good movie" (*GameArena*).

## Know Your Audience (or Your Players)

As *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* shows, video games can function successfully as a storytelling medium — especially if they are invested in worldmaking rather than the exposition of a linear narrative. Since 2003, many other games have followed in *SoT*'s footprints, focusing on the creation of a compelling world for the player to play in rather than on narrative aspirations drawn from the expectations of more traditional storytelling media. The critical and popular successes of such games — games like *Half-Life 2*, *Bioshock*, *Fallout 3*, and *Starcraft 2*, to name a few — is heartening, and bears out the importance of games' continued investment in worldmaking. Yet, nine years on from *SoT*'s release, there is still no widespread acknowledgment of the distinction between worldmaking and narrative in the gaming community, neither among gamemakers nor players.

With no common rhetoric to describe *why* these still-rare games are successful storytellers, they are often viewed as surprising — if pleasant — anomalies, great not because of the gameworlds they provide for the player, but because they somehow attain a mysterious state of artistry not seen in other



games. Looked at outside of the conflation of storytelling and narrative, however, the success of such games couldn't be less of a mystery. They have hit upon the quality that allows video games to be a unique expressive medium in their own right, free from the narrative baggage of books and film. Embracing the video game medium's unique storytelling possibilities is essential for any contemporary game that aspires to be anything more than the barest of twitch shooters or the next *Tetris* or *Bejeweled* clone.

Film, of course, has more than proved its validity as an expressive medium in the last century. The film industry is just as guilty of conflating passive and interactive storytelling as the video game industry, and it works against their purposes just as much. Filmmakers' fascination with uncritically adapting video games is just muddying the waters further, distracting from what films do best: exposition of narrative with a level of nuance that games cannot — and most likely will never — achieve, and the generation of a story-driven dramatic tension that can only exist in passive media. Film can, in theory at least, productively borrow intellectual properties from video games and vice versa; however, as Mechner work seems to suggest, this is perhaps where the crossover should stop.

## NOTES

1. The film was directed by Mike Newell and stars actors Jake Gyllenhall, Alfred Molina, and Ben Kingsley.

2. The film was shot on location in Morocco and features elaborate sets, costumes, and CGI-driven special effects.

3. The film's rating on popular movie-review-aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes is currently 35 percent, based on 213 critics' reviews, while the average audience review (out of 336, 873 total) is 3.3 stars out of 5 ("Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time," *Rotten Tomatoes*).

4. Though this nomenclature is not necessarily ideal since it could be argued that watching a film (or reading a book, etc.) is in some sense interactive, I make this distinction to indicate the difference between media in which the audience's agency extends only as far as their subjective sensory interpretations of a static story crafted entirely by an outside author ("passive storytelling") and media in which the player's agency extends to active alteration of the gameworld that the story takes place in, to the point that the player could arguably be considered a co-author of the game's story ("interactive storytelling").

5. For a particularly fascinating (if somewhat simplistic) attempt at the creation of a game based around such characters, consider *Facade*, created by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern.

6. Like any good story, *SoT* refuses to take itself completely seriously, and it often pokes fun at its own reliance on voiceover without simultaneously undermining the efficacy of that voiceover as a storytelling device. For instance, at one point, in a rare moment of "telling, not showing," the Prince begins to describe (in voiceover) his budding romantic feelings for the Princess. However, after a few moments of this, he stops, shouting: "Argh! Why am I talking to myself?"

7. For example, at one point the Prince and Farah are seemingly stuck in a dungeon-like area and the Prince sarcastically asks: "Isn't there a crack you can slip through?"

## CHAPTER 5

# Translation Between Forms of Interactivity: How to Build the Better Adaptation

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MARCUS SCHULZKE

It has been well-documented that video games have had a somewhat troubled relationship when translated into other media. Movies and books based on video games are often unsuccessful and derided by critics for having shallow plots and underdeveloped characters. *Super Mario Bros.* (1993), one of the first films based on a hugely-popular and seminal video game franchise, was a critical and commercial failure that earned less than half of its \$48 million budget (Stang, et al. 380). Many other adaptations, such as *Street Fighter* (1994), *Double Dragon* (1994), *Mortal Kombat: Annihilation* (1997), *Wing Commander* (1999), *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), *House of the Dead* (2003), *Alone in the Dark* (2005), *Doom* (2005), *BloodRayne* (2005), *Postal* (2007), and *Street Fighter: The Legend of Chun-Li* (2009) had similarly poor box office returns and critical receptions. Some of the *relatively* successful adaptations by the standards of the genre, such as *Mortal Kombat* (1995) and *Silent Hill* (2006), received mixed-to-tepid reviews from critics and earned modest returns on their production costs (let alone marketing which often doubles a production's budget). Only a few movies based on video games, including *Pokémon: The Movie 2000* (1999), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010), performed respectably at the box office. However, even these movies were assigned lower-than-average grades by film critics.

Rarely does a video game based on books and movies tend to be more successful. Some, most notably *Goldeneye 007* (1997), have even become clas-

sics. But those games tend to be the aberration that proves the norm: many games based on films, television shows, and books — including game versions of extremely popular movies such as *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Star Wars* (1987), *Back to the Future* (1989), *Home Alone* (1991), *Back to the Future III* (1991), *Friday the 13th* (1989), *Enter the Matrix* (2003), *Fight Club* (2004), and *Reservoir Dogs* (2006) — have been unpopular with critics and consumers. Indeed, as Warren Buckland says, “movie inspired videogames have a fairly low reputation amongst dedicated gaming audiences” (89). The record of adaptive failures, in both directions, seems to indicate that games are so vastly different from books and movies that successful adaptation may be impossible. However, as this essay will show, the problem is not the impossibility of adapting stories from game to other media (or vice versa), but rather such adaptations have (thus far) failed to adequately translate between different medias’ types of interactivity.

Many of the commentaries on adaptation to and from video assume that games are an interactive form of entertainment, while the experience of movies and books is passive. Film critic Roger Ebert explicitly has taken this position, when he claims that games are inferior to other media because they lack authorial control (“Video Games Can Never Be Art”). From his perspective, video games allow players to affect the course of the game and, consequently, lead the game narrative to deviate from the coherent authorial message that he thinks characterizes art. In his article “Video Games Can Never Be Art,” Ebert says that “you can win a game. It has rules, points, objectives, and an outcome,” but that works of art “are things you cannot win; you can only experience them.” Ebert is not alone, though; game scholars also frequently describe video games as interactive media and contrast them with passive media (Klimmt and Hartmann, 162; Lee 317). However, equating games with interactivity and movies and books with passivity obscures the ways in which each of these media depends on different forms on interactivity. It may be true that video games depend on a more direct form of participation than most other media; it is a form that is easy to identify as being interactive because of the visible input from players. Yet, books and movies are by no means static artifacts: these media encourage audiences to imaginatively fill in missing information, to judge the characters and their motives, and to discover the meaning of the texts. Openness to interpretation is a defining characteristic of great books and films. It allows them to be rediscovered by successive audiences and facilitates endless discussion over their central themes and overall meaning. As a form of interactivity, interpretation may be a less visible form of interactivity than that which happens in relation to video games, but it stands nonetheless as interactivity, for it requires the audience to play an essential role in constituting the text.

The central challenge of adapting video games to other media (and the reverse) seems to hinge on successfully transitioning between different forms of interactivity. Games are defined by their participatory interactivity; they allow players to provide an input and control events and characters. Books and movies, by contrast, rely on interpretive interactivity; texts using these media, especially those with complex plots and characters, invite audiences to interact with a text through critical thinking. The two forms of interactivity are not mutually exclusive, nor are these two types exhaustive of the forms interactivity can take. Nevertheless, comparing these media in terms of participatory and interpretive interactivity sheds light on the problems and possibilities of adaptation across media, as these kinds of interactivity distinguish games from books and movies and because translation between the modes of interactivity is the point at which many adaptations fail. This essay argues that adaptations from video games should focus on not only filling in the gaps in story and character development left by the video game but also on creating new interpretive challenges that can lead audiences to become invested in the text; while games based on movies and books should relinquish authorial control and make engaging games that allow players to affect the game world—even if it means violating fidelity to the “original” work, simplifying story, and/or allowing players to change plot sequencing or events.

## Locating the Source of the Problem

Video games based on books and movies have a mixed record of success. Some have been extremely popular, while others have been harshly criticized. Several commentators have argued that the lack of original narrative is the reason so many of these games have been unsuccessful (Begy and Consalvo 222, Elkington 216, C. H. Miller 48). For example, Jason Begy and Mia Consalvo argue that the nature of player activity “[is] defined by the game’s fiction,” and, as such, games based on movies do not allow for much agency. Gamers must adhere to the clearly defined storyline of the original film license. Similarly, Trevor Elkington points out that “video games based on film and television licenses must attempt to appease two audiences: fans of the original license, who expect a certain adherence to its details, and fans of video games, who expect adherence to common notions of gameplay,” falling under scrutiny from diehards of both media (215). These commentators may be right in considering originality a contributing factor in determining a game’s popularity, but they make the mistake of casting the problem in terms of narrative when gameplay is more often what determines whether these games are well received.



In other words, narrative originality is less important than creative, engaging gameplay. This becomes quite clear in a game such as Nintendo's *GoldenEye 007*.

*GoldenEye 007* follows the story of the 1995 *GoldenEye* film very closely. The game's plot follows the same course, game levels link closely to specific film scenes and locations (with minor expansions), and game characters are nearly identical to the set of characters in the film. To anyone who has watched the movie, the game narrative offers few surprises. Nevertheless, the game was one of the most popular ever released for the Nintendo 64 or any other game system. This success had much to do with the quality of the gameplay experience. The controls were intuitive, the AI was good for its time, the variety of weapons allowed endless experimentation (including weapons from other Bond movies, such as the *Moonraker* laser), and there were extensive multiplayer options. Despite its lack of originality from a narrative standpoint, it was highly original from the perspective of gameplay, so much so that it stands out as a fixture on lists<sup>1</sup>—both critical and commercial—of the greatest video games ever made.

*GoldenEye 007* is one of the more prominent examples of how a game can be enjoyable despite its lack of narrative originality, yet it is by no means unique. Over the past decade, World War II shooters have been one of the most popular game genres, and, while few of these games are explicitly based on movies or books, most draw their plots from other media. The Omaha Beach landing in *Medal of Honor* (1999) follows the events of the landing in the film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). This parallel may have had much to do with Steven Spielberg's involvement in both projects, yet striking similarities to films are evident in other games as well. The Russian sniper campaigns in *Call of Duty* (2003) and *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008) are nearly identical to scenes in the movie *Enemy at the Gates* (2001). For example, *Call of Duty* includes scenes featuring Russian soldiers crossing the Volga River during a German bombardment, soldiers hiding among dead bodies to escape German patrols, and snipers fighting through a collapsing department store, which are clearly borrowed from *Enemy at the Gates*. Other games in the *Medal of Honor*, *Call of Duty*, and *Brothers in Arms* franchises have also drawn heavily from recent World War II movies like *A Thin Red Line* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001) to construct their levels, characters, and narratives. These games are extremely popular, yet in each case, large portions of them mirror scenes from popular movies, making them, relatively, unoriginal in terms of narrative. Video games' debt to and imitation of film types and even specific movie scenes extends beyond war games. The developers of the zombie game *Dead Rising* (2006) were sued by Richard Rubinstein, the producer of the classic zombie movie *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), who claimed that the game violated

the movie's copyright ("Producer, Game Firm"). Like the movie, the game takes place in a mall, involves scenes of the mall's products being creatively used to kill the zombies, and critiques the culture of mall shopping. While Rubinstein ultimately lost the suit because the theme of fighting zombies in a mall was considered too broad to be protected by copyright, the case reveals the deep similarities between some video games and movies, even when the games are not explicitly based on a movie. Moreover, like the World War II games discussed previously, *Dead Rising* was successful with critics and fans despite the close parallels to *Dawn of the Dead* and the limits of its narrative originality (*Dead Rising*), suggesting its gameplay was strong enough to overcome its lack of narrative originality.

It is more difficult to determine the elements of a successful game-to-film adaptation. Most movies based on video games have received poor reviews and low ticket sales, leaving few models of success, "as in the case of the highly anticipated *Doom* (2005)" (Hiddlestone 98). As Harold Goldberg says, "There has never been a standout movie, one with a compelling plot and A-list acting, made from a video game. Compared to the best action movies from the world of comics, such as *The Dark Knight* or *Spider-Man*, videogame movies have sucked" (288). One explanation for the limited success of movies based on video games is that adaptations violate the fidelity to the original work. They deviate too much from the video games, changing their stories and often completely redesigning characters. This might explain the failure of *Super Mario Bros.* (1993), which altered a number of aspects of the games, including having Bowser played by a human, constructing a strange storyline about him descending from a dinosaur, and making the *mise-en-scène* dark — a strange contrast with the bright colors of the video game franchise. The fidelity explanation makes sense to the extent that movies do risk alienating a game's fans when they change such basic elements of a game as the main characters' species. However, this explanation is limited, and ultimately revisions of the substance of the game narrative or alteration of characters are less important than fidelity to the essence of the original work.

While some games have weak or nonexistent storylines, limited dialogue, or few characters, adapting these games to movie or book demands significant changes to the game, even to the point of creating an entirely new storyline. Indeed, *Super Mario Bros.* is a prime example of a game that offers only a minimal storyline to use as the basis for a movie. The movie had to expand on the original 8-bit game, particularly on its limited interactive dialogue between a plumber and an overgrown lizard. The failing was not that the film expanded aspects of the game, but that it did a poor job in its efforts. For example, Richard Edson, who played Spike, reported that he and other actors were not only allowed to make up their own dialogue but they were encour-

aged to make significant changes to the movie's plot because the script was considered too weak to be used as it was written:

So we went into our dialogue and it got laughs and they loved it and that was eventually used, but from that moment on we got permission and the license to rewrite all our dialogue, come up with new scenes, whatever we wanted to do. They were more than happy to do it and so Fisher and I would get together and we would work on scenes and we would come up with our dialogue and it got to the point where we wouldn't even do their dialogue anymore [Tito].

This ultimately created an even deeper problem as Tito reports that, prior to this, the script was "rewritten so many times that it didn't have any cohesion." The problem of the degree and quality of augmentation crops up with other game-to-film adaptations, too. Fighting games, such as *Mortal Kombat* (1992), *Double Dragon* (1987), and *Street Fighter* (1987), quite neatly illustrate how many additions have to be made in order to transform games into movies. These games are little more than a series of fights punctuated by one-word exchanges between fighters and short transition cutscenes. The movies based on such games successfully incorporate the games' graphic fights, but they had to create new narratives to bring the sequence of fights into narrative relation, as well as add new dialogue to develop the characters. Like the *Super Mario Bros.* movie, the success or failure of the movies based on fighting games has been heavily dependent on the quality of the additions.

Games with, by comparison, more "complex" narratives, like those in the *Resident Evil* series and the *Silent Hill* series, provide more guidance for a shift into a different media. However, movies based on these games have also encountered problems. Some of these problems, such as poor acting and poor special effects, are important but not decisive determinants of critical or popular success. These have hindered adaptations and made them less convincing than they might have been, yet the real issue is that these movies suffer from the same basic weakness as adaptations from games with less narrative complexity: they expand on the game narrative with additions that work poorly within the new medium of expression, as *Resident Evil* (2002) features "an already thin story [that] boils down to surviving invaders seeking an existent anti-virus" (Clark). More action by flat characters, more stilted dialogue, additional scenes or details sequenced without tidy filmic suture does not make for a compelling movie. Even more, though, the root cause of the one-dimensional appearance of many movies based on video games is that the video games' distinct mode of interactivity has been lost without being replaced by the interpretive form of interactivity that fits the story's new medium.



## Participatory Interactivity

Video games are often described as the exemplars of interactive entertainment.<sup>2</sup> They incorporate feedback mechanisms, reward systems, variable plots, choices that affect the course of the game, and open worlds that not only immerse players in experiences but that also feel highly personalized and responsive. The degree of player control over the narrative varies a great deal depending on the type of game, but even the most highly structured games allow players to participate in the game. Linear games, take the original 8-bit *Super Mario Bros.* for example, give players little control over the game narrative, aside from the power to advance through the game and earn achievements. Nevertheless, linear games produce interactivity through mechanisms like reward systems and reflexivity. Reflexivity, arguably the defining characteristic of video games, is the mutual influence of the player on the game and the game on the player. It is players' power to shape the game world through their actions and to see the effects of their input in the game world. Reward systems differ dramatically across games, but almost every type of game offers some way of tracking progress through points, achievements, and titles, allowing players to mark their experience and feel a sense of progress and efficacy. This reward system has risen to the forefront of video games with "the introduction of achievements on the Xbox 360, [and] the concept has spread to a number of different platforms such as Steam, Playstation 3 and Battle.net. Achievements are, however, nothing new. The Atari 2600 had a similar system in place almost 30 years ago" (Jakobsson). These reward systems are also what players use to showcase their progress on a game and to interact with other gamers, even in linear games, showing off scores and achievements. Reward and achievement systems offer concrete evidence of players' reflexivity, thus allowing players to perpetually participate in the game.

Nonlinear games, including everything from sports games to sandbox games, also incorporate reward systems and reflexivity, but go even further in giving players the ability to affect the game world. These games generally have some structure and clear goals, such as winning the championship in sports games or completing the main quests in an open world, but they allow players to reach goals through different routes. Nonlinear games often emphasize the player's power to determine the narrative with ending sequences that change based on the choices the player made throughout the game. The games in the *Fallout* series are a prime example of this. In *New Vegas* (2009) players must ally themselves with one of the game's factions and complete faction missions that involve attacking or helping other factions, thereby allowing players to choose a unique route through the game. The game ends with a complex video sequence, which can take dozens of forms depending on how



players treated each of the game's factions. This sequence explains the role the player had in reshaping the balance of power in the Mojave wasteland, which may include the destruction of entire towns and species or the establishment of a more peaceful order in the chaotic desert. Finally, virtual worlds allow even more freedom of action. Players can interact with each other and explore the game worlds without strong narrative guidance. Some, such as *Second Life* (2003), offer players the power to create their own content, making the world highly customizable and responsive to players' wishes.

As these three broad types of game structures show, video games differ a great deal in the extent to which they allow players to control the game narrative or to develop characters according to their wishes. However, the different game structures are unified by characteristics like reflexivity, input mechanisms, and reward systems. These mechanisms create participatory interactivity that distinguishes games from other media. In fact, participatory interactivity works as the feature that connects the many different kinds of video games together into an identifiable medium (Apperley 6, Wolf 21). Games are not, however, purely interactive; they always constrain players' actions in some ways, and there are significant differences in the extent to which they give players the freedom to control the game narrative. As James Newman notes, "videogames present highly structured and, importantly, highly segmented experiences. Play sequences, from where the idea of the interactivity or ergodicity of videogames derives, are framed and punctuated by movie sequences, map screens, score or lap-time feedback screens and so on." All video games require input from players, making participatory interactivity one of the defining characteristics of games. This is why games can be successful even when they are based on an unoriginal or underdeveloped story, and why a text with a strong narrative but lacking reflexivity, input, and reward systems would not qualify as a game.

## Interpretive Interactivity

The way audiences view films or read books may appear to be more passive than the way players interact with video games because of the absence of participatory interactivity. Audiences sit and observe these media. They do not direct the narrative in a particular way, nor do they receive any points for watching. These media rarely allow audiences to alter the text, so the text seems to exist apart from the audience, unaffected by it. Some game scholars characterize traditional media as being fundamentally different from video games because of they are "noninteractive" (Klimmt 152, Lee 317). Roger Ebert, as noted, even uses this sensibility as the basis for his critique of video

games. He considers video games structurally inferior to other media because “video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control” (*Roger Ebert’s Movie Yearbook* 931). There is an element of truth to these claims of authorial control and audience passivity. Authors and directors are certainly the ones responsible for producing a book or film and deserve much of the credit for the quality of the product. However, the appearance of audience passivity is misleading. Although viewers do not alter the course of events in the films they watch or the books they read, they can help to determine what these texts mean.

And while the defining features of books and films are heavily contested, one of the most widely agreed upon features of a good work in either medium is the extent to which a text leaves itself open to multiple interpretations. As Italo Calvino says, “a classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say” (128). Great books and movies are living texts that can be analyzed and debated. Audiences can attempt to discover new themes, find hidden references, and use the story to interpret real events. Terry Eagleton says that great works endure because “we always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns” (10). The countless volumes of criticism and commentary on books and movies are evidence of the extent to which these media encourage audience participation in interpreting these texts. Regardless of the theory one applies, finding meaning functions as an interpretive task—one that can require as much attention and involvement as a video game even if it does not involve reflexivity or reward systems.

Even casual viewers and readers must engage in interpretive interaction with movies and books in order to understand them. Books and movies leave out a great deal of information; they cannot fully explain characters’ backgrounds or the story’s setting given the limited time or space available. This forces audience members to construct aspects of the story themselves. This is especially true of books. Books omit many details that are extraneous to the plot but that may be filled in by readers. Because the author’s descriptions invariably provide less information than visual imagery does, they encourage readers to use their own imaginations to fill in the missing information. It is up to readers to imagine many details about the characters, setting, and plot to make sense of the story. The experience of supplying these details should be familiar to anyone who has read a novel and imagined what the settings would look like or what characters’ voices might sound like.

Games, by comparison, are less reliant on interpretive interactivity. They are adept at creating immersive environments that provide players with a great deal of visual and auditory information. As Barton points out, contemporary games “make the realism of their three-dimensional virtual worlds a key selling

point.” Games often provide such convincing graphics and sound that they immerse players in a world that appears to be complete and inhabitable, as “these worlds are represented both graphically and aurally in multiple dimensions, and players must navigate them in a manner designed to simulate real-life” (Barton). By creating these complex and detailed environments, games demand less of players’ imaginations to fill in the gaps in the experience than media that do not provide such a fully-formed world. Janet Horowitz Murray suggests that

eventually all successful storytelling technologies become “transparent” we lose consciousness of the medium and see neither print nor film but only the power of the story itself. If digital art reaches the same level of expressiveness as these older media, we will no longer concern ourselves with how we are receiving the information. We will only think about what truth it has told us about our lives [26].

Most of the information necessary for understanding the game world is immediately apparent; players do not have to input this information themselves as they would when reading a book.

The importance of interpretive interactivity in making apparently passive media interactive is evident from the fan communities that form around books and movies. Many studies of fan communities, including those done by Henry Jenkins in his various works, have found that one of the driving forces behind fan dedication is that fan texts are polysemous — that is to say, capable of supporting multiple interpretations. Polysemy gives fans the opportunity to decode it in various ways and to continue enjoying them over time: “The polysemic text allows for different readings by different readers” (Sandvoss 126). Unlike video games, which can be engaging and enjoyable even when the characters and plot are weak or unoriginal, books and movies are more heavily dependent on polysemy to make their audiences more than passive viewers.

Books and films are not more or less interactive than games, nor are the different forms of interactivity mutually exclusive. Games with complex stories may use the interpretive dimension of interactivity, as *BioShock* demonstrates. *BioShock* raises many deep challenges which encourage players to reflect on their experiences of the game world. Scholars writing about the often maligned *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) series have produced many insightful readings of the games. Ben DeVane and Kurt Squire find that players interpret *GTA* differently based on their own experiences as “they do not passively receive the games’ images and content” (264). Kiri Miller views the game as an ethnographer experiencing the world of *GTA* and shows that there is a great deal more to the games than violence by “framing players’ *GTA* gameworld explorations and the ‘tactical and joyful dexterity’ of their gameplay performances as a



form of ethnographic fieldwork.” There is also subtle social commentary and criticism of popular culture that become visible when one sees the game from an ethnographic perspective. Books and movies have likewise experimented with elements of participatory interactivity with things like choose your own adventure stories, hypertext novels, and interactive movies. These show that the participatory and interpretive forms of interactivity are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, even texts that include both forms of interactivity usually privilege the one that correspond to its medium. Games like *BioShock* and *Grand Theft Auto* employ engaging gameplay mechanics in addition to their strong narratives, while interactive books and movies tend to offer far fewer opportunities for audience participation than a video game would.

The different forms of interactivity associated with games and other media imply different standards of judgment when assessing the quality of a text. Games can be judged by the standards of interpretive interactivity, and they often are, but this form of interactivity is secondary. The primary criteria for judging games tend to be judgments of participatory interactivity, such as how fun the game is to play, how well it succeeds in immersing the player in the game world, and whether there is variation in the gameplay experience. A game can be successful even if it lacks any literary depth, yet it cannot even be called a game if it lacks participatory interactivity. Movies and books, by contrast, rarely have a participatory dimension. When one is added, it usually comes at the expense of the story. No interactive film, choose your own adventure book, or hypertext novel has achieved the status of a classic on the same level as novels and short stories with more authorial control. It seems unlikely that any will given the costs participatory interactivity tends to impose on storytelling in these media. Instead, these works are judged by how they facilitate interpretive interactivity. Therefore, as the next section will show, one of the most important challenges to overcome when developing games based on books and movies or books and movies based on games is translating between interactive and participatory interactivity.

## Using the Right Type of Interactivity

One of the greatest challenges of adapting video games to other media or other media to video games is switching between the participatory and interpretive forms of interactivity. Many video games based on books and movies, such as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) and *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (2003), leave too much of the gameplay experience to interpretive interactivity. This is most obvious when they force players to watch the key events of the game unfold in cutscenes or in dialogue boxes,



while limiting players' ability to steer their character toward the next objective. These techniques that control the narrative interrupt players' immersion in the game and diminish the extent to which players can experience the participatory interactivity they expect from a game. As Trevor Elkington points out, the restrictions that arise when preference is given to narrative rather than gameplay is especially harmful when a game uses video or text borrowed directly from a movie or book (219). When storytelling has primacy, the gameplay has to provide players with enough control over how levels are completed to overcome the limitations of linearity. By contrast, the gameplay experience is dramatically improved when the book or movie is recreated in the game world according to the logic of participatory interactivity.

Successful book/film-to-game adaptation depends heavily on finding ways of increasing player participation in the game world. This demands immersive game mechanics and a high degree of player control, quite the opposite of what happens "[w]hen you adapt a film into a game, [which] involves translating events in the film into environments within the game" (Jenkins, "Game Design" 122). The advantage of an original game narrative — one that deviates from the text the game is based on — is that exploring new locations and events frees the game to devote more attention to gameplay. Games that use original stories tend to be more willing to allow players to affect the game world. For example, as Jenkins states, some of the *Star Wars* video games show how greater narrative originality can indirectly improve gameplay:

The *Star Wars* game may not simply retell the story of *Star Wars*, but it doesn't have to in order to enrich or expand our experience of the *Star Wars* saga. We already know the story before we even buy the game and would be frustrated if all it offered us was a regurgitation of the original film experience. Rather, the *Star Wars* game exists in dialogue with the films, conveying new narrative experiences through its creative manipulation of environmental details [124].

Many games in the *Star Wars* franchise, such as the *Rebel Assault* series, the *Jedi Knight* series, and *The Force Unleashed* series, are examples of what Henry Jenkins calls "evoked narratives" — narratives formed by borrowing from familiar stories and making an open universe that can be explored (Jenkins "Game Design"). They allow players to take control of characters not included in the books and movies or to control familiar characters as they undergo new adventures to create an expanded canon. Because these games do not follow the plot of the *Star Wars* movies, they can allow players to have a greater influence on the game world, increasing the game's participatory interactivity. Thus, returning to the issue of originality raised in the first part of the essay, it becomes clear that originality can be indirectly important to the extent that it promotes player participation. Originality is not valuable

for its own sake, but rather it can be one way to release the constraints of authorial control.

The primary difficulty in adapting games to movies is adding to the game narrative and developing its characters without making one-dimensional texts that present no challenges for audiences to confront. This difficulty is often clearest when it comes to characters. Most films based on games have included shallow characters that are difficult to sympathize with because they lack a human dimension. They are too perfect, too extreme, and, worst of all, too static. Good characters in books and movies usually change throughout the story. They grow and learn or are corrupted and debased as they gain experience. Video game characters rarely go through similar transformations. Even games with the best plots tend to leave their characters poorly defined. For example, *Portal* (2007) and *Portal 2* (2011) have strong, well-developed plots, but the lead character is such an empty figure that non-player characters make jokes about her stupidity and her inability to speak. Games that lack well-developed lead characters can have engaging gameplay mechanics and even strong narratives because they rarely have to entice players to care about the character they control. Playable characters are easy to identify with because they become extensions of the player. In fact, the lack of depth may even facilitate a player's ability to identify with the character, as it can be easier to take control of a poorly defined, blank-slate character than someone who already has a personality.

The leading characters in books and movies are much different from the static characters of video games. They usually experience profound changes over the course of the story. Some of the greatest works of film and literature are those that focus on character development and encourage the audience to understand them on a personal level. Even characters in comic books have vulnerabilities and faults that render them human at dramatic moments. Adapting games into movies and books requires adding far more depth to video game characters. The audience must see that they are flawed, imperfect people who have weaknesses and personal challenges to overcome. Imperfection — something few of the main characters in video games seem to have — provide the impetus that moves a story forward and gives the audience something to reflect on and interpret as they watch the character develop. The mistake of the *Super Mario Bros.* movie and of many other weak game-to-film adaptations is adding to the game narrative to make it longer without also adding significant opportunities for character development. The characters are given motives and desires, but they lack the kind of inner contradictions and personal struggles that encourage growth and transformation. Moreover, the challenges they encounter tend to be the kind of simplistic good vs. evil types of challenges that do not push the characters to develop in interesting ways.

## Confronting the Challenges of Adaptation

It is possible to draw on video games to create books and movies, and it is likewise possible to base games on books and movies. However, doing so requires recognizing the much different modes of interactivity that these media facilitate. Video games rely on a distinct form of participatory interactivity that is much different from the interpretive interactivity of books and movies. Each form of interactivity is essential to the media it is associated with, but they are present in varying degrees depending on the openness of a game or the complexity of a book or film. Although a text may incorporate both forms of interactivity, one is always privileged, making the line dividing the two forms of interactivity very difficult to cross. The central challenge in adapting between games and other media is making the changes necessary to create a text that is good by the standards of a different mode of interactivity. Games based on other media may borrow heavily from their source material, even to the extent that their narratives are unoriginal, but they must deviate from the source material enough to allow players to participate in the game world. By contrast, movies and books based on games must create interpretive interactivity with narrative complexity and dynamic characters. They must be more than static artifacts to be seen by audiences. They should also be texts to be interpreted and experienced in different ways.

### NOTES

1. Metacritic.com, an aggregate reviewing website that not only compiles reviews from critics but reviews from gamers themselves, currently has *Goldeneye 007* rated at a “96 out of 100” with “Universal acclaim based on 21 Critics.”
2. See Peter Vorderer, Jennings Bryant, Katherine M. Pieper, and René Weber’s “Playing Video Games as Entertainment.”





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PART II: THE TERMS OF THE TALE:  
TIME, PLACE AND OTHER  
IDEOLOGICALLY CONSTRUCTED  
CONDITIONS

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## CHAPTER 6

# Playing (in) the City: *The Warriors* and Images of Urban Disorder

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AUBREY ANABLE

When Walter Hill's film about New York City gangs, *The Warriors*, was released in 1979,<sup>1</sup> it tapped into widespread fears that the city was dangerous, disorderly, and in irreversible decline. New York City had suffered through almost two decades of severe financial crises, floundering city services, rising crime rates, neglect by the federal government, decaying infrastructure, and several urban uprisings. Memorably, in July of 1977, the city experienced a massive power failure during which thousands of residents took to the streets, breaking storefront windows, looting, and setting fires (Van Gelder 3). Although President Richard Nixon declared in his 1972 "Radio Address on Urban Affairs" that the official "urban crisis" in the U.S. was over, these events put forward, once again, images of angry young Black and Latino men as a kind of visual shorthand for representing the city in crisis. Newspapers, magazines, and TV news coverage of the events of 1977 represented them as an aftershock of the race riots that affected American cities during the previous decade; they were yet another sign of the decline of the American city, and they offered more fuel for the continuing white flight to the suburbs (Raab 42; Clines 15). Released two years later, *The Warriors* invoked the rhetoric of urban crisis in its marketing. The film's poster art depicted hundreds of gang members, some brandishing weapons, gathered in a park (referencing a key scene at the beginning of the film). Each person in the image is facing forward and staring defiantly at the viewer. The poster reads, "These are the armies of the night. They are 100,000 strong. They outnumber the cops five to one. They could run New York City. Tonight they're all out to get the Warriors." Rather than being menacing, however, *The Warriors*' "armies of the night"

are street gangs seen in the distorted reflection of a funhouse mirror at a Coney Island amusement park. The film's urban crisis is the city overtaken and controlled by goofy, roving groups of baseball players, pimps, and mimes.

In 2005, twenty-six years after *The Warriors* made New York City's decline look fun, the video game developer and publisher Rockstar released a video game adaptation of the film for the Playstation 2. On the Blackout level of the game, the player emerges from New York City's subway system to find chaos in the streets. In the wake of a power failure, people have taken to the streets to loot and start fires. The game then directs the player to join in the mayhem and wreak as much havoc as possible. The riot as interactive playtime is only one of many reminders that *The Warriors* video game also traffics in the aforementioned racially-charged images of urban disorder. Yet, when the video game was released, controversial urban planning policies had transformed New York City's dangerous and disorderly image into a whiter, wealthier, and family-friendlier one. What, then, can *The Warriors* video game possibly say about the city in a post-urban crisis age when the gritty image of New York City — what used to be seen in the movies — is now something one mostly sees in video games?

The video game's paratexts carefully reproduced the tone of the film's marketing. The film's original poster, for example, was cropped and repurposed for the game's packaging. On the game's back cover, however, the "armies of the night" tagline from the original poster is significantly revised. It reads, "New York, 1979. A battle on the streets. The armies of the night number 60,000 strong, and tonight they're all after the Warriors" (*The Warriors*, Rockstar).<sup>2</sup> In 1979, the film's tagline hinged on the provocative claim that the gangs "could run New York City." The conditional mood of this statement sums up the film's meaning well. They *could* run the city, if only they can get beyond the socio-political forces that keep them from forming a unified movement. Similarly, the video game's exclusion of the film's political threat neatly signals the transformation that the rhetoric of urban crisis undergoes from film space to game space. *The Warriors* video game is less about revolutionary events that *may* happen and more about an ahistorical nostalgia for a dangerous and grim city.

Through a comparison of *The Warriors* film to its video game adaptation, this essay shows how seemingly similar representations of urban disorder take on different meanings in different historical moments as they move from film space to game space and from images to be viewed to images to be played. *The Warriors* film transforms the space of the city from pathology to playground. In many ways, the film is already like a video game. The artfully choreographed fight scenes that regularly interrupt the narrative are structured like a series of levels the gang must move through in order to complete their

final mission of returning home. With the video game adaptation, the film's playful reimagining of urban disorder is mirrored, but distorted, by the explicit *to-be-playedness* of video game interactivity. The game's address to the imagined individual player, as opposed to the film's address to the imagined collective audience, changes the terms of the relationship between *The Warriors'* story, its city, and its politics of play. Whereas *The Warriors* film presents New York City as a playground, which has the effect of humorously calling out the race and class politics of urban crisis discourse, the video game presents the city as a dark and dangerous field for combat, where playing is not a political tactic of the weak, but rather, the only way an individual may compete and survive.

### Games, Genre and Moral Panic

At the beginning of *The Warriors* film, Cyrus, the leader of New York City's most powerful gang, calls a meeting of all the gangs at which he gives a speech about their potential to wrest control of the city from the police. Speaking to the assembly, Cyrus states, "The problem in the past has been the man turning us against one another. We have been unable to see the truth because we have been fighting for ten square feet of ground. Our turf... That's crap, brothers. The turf is ours by right!" At the end of the speech, the police raid the meeting, and in the ensuing mayhem, the leader of an all-white gang, the Rogues, assassinates Cyrus. The Warriors, a multi-racial gang from Coney Island, are blamed for Cyrus's death and engender the wrath of every gang in the city. The Warriors make a run for the subway to catch a train back to the safety of Coney Island. The rest of the film follows the gang's attempt to navigate through hostile territory during the middle of the night, while trying to evade the police and other gangs, in a city that is presented as fantastical as it is dark and dysfunctional.

In the film, New York City appears to be nearly abandoned. The only signs of human life besides the gangs are the police and a few bystanders. The streets are dimly lit, strewn with litter, and most surfaces are covered with graffiti. It is a familiar representation of the city as menace. This cliché of visual culture operates on the assumption that all we need to see are the signs of neglected urban infrastructure to know that only crime and violence can emerge from these streets. When the gangs appear in the film, they are so overdetermined by stereotypes that they read as comical rather than as indexical representations of actual gangs. For example, the Boppers, a Black youth gang, are identically dressed as pimps in feathered fedoras and pink satin vests. The Savage Huns are from Chinatown and wear green military fatigues



and brown pointy Mongolian-style hats. The Punks are confusingly dressed in rugby shirts, overalls, and roller skates. The Furies wear baseball uniforms and KISS-like face paint, and the Hi-Hats are made up like mimes and wear top hats and suspenders. The Warriors appear only slightly more respectable, if no less believable, in their matching brown pleather vests, beads and feathers, and other pseudo-Native American attire. The gangs' absurd attire has the effect of calling out the other stereotypes and visual clichés of the film. The juxtaposition of the whimsical, colorful, and orderly gangs against the grim urban landscape is counterintuitive and casts urban "disorder" in a new light.

*The Warriors'* lasting popularity as a transmedia cult narrative can be attributed to the ways its different iterations speak to different social contexts of urban crisis and reform. In the 1970s, the film spoke to an audience well-versed in the lexicon of urban crisis. In 2005, the video game addressed a player more likely to associate cities with rejuvenated downtowns, expensive real estate, and low crime rates. Though both the film and the video game are amalgamations of several genres, their representations of the city are grounded in the tropes of the gangster film and the urban crime video game, and their reception is connected to expectations about these genres. The links between these media and genres can help us understand *The Warriors'* place in a history of discourses about the American city and the historically related moral panics about the effects of popular media on the urban masses. For example, upon *The Warriors'* release in February of 1979, incidents of brawling, vandalism, and even murders were reported at or near theaters that were screening the film. The reported violence was quickly deemed coincidental and not caused by the film's content, but the publicity and taint of moral panic lingered (Schaumburg 3; "Small Cities Eye *Warriors* Wryly" 24).<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in 2005, the year *The Warriors* video game was released, the National Institute on Family and the Media (NIFM) included the game on their annual list of what they deemed to be the year's most morally-reprehensible video games. 2005 was also the year senators Hillary Clinton and Joseph Lieberman presented to Congress the Family Entertainment Protection Act (FEPA), a bill that called for federally mandated enforcement of the Entertainment Software Rating Board's ratings system for video games.<sup>4</sup> On the same day that FEPA was introduced to Congress, Senator Lieberman appeared with David Walsh, the founder of NIFM, at a Capitol Hill press briefing where they showed clips from video games such as *The Warriors*, *Urban Reign*, and *True Crime: New York City*. Walsh and Lieberman contextualized their concerns about the video games on NIFM's list and the proposed legislation in terms of public health, specifically how video games may cause violence, obesity, and addiction in children. Despite this broad array of concerns, the

games that were cited most by NIFM as the most destructive to public health were the games that positioned their players as urban criminals.

Genre conventions and expectations are intimately bound up with the panics around both *The Warriors* film and video game. One of the central generic conventions of the gangster film — the charismatic protagonist who rises through the ranks and then has a dramatic downfall — emerged during the 1930s as a necessary device for dealing with the cultural climate of concern about the violence and criminal activity that such films portray. In the conventional gangster film, the narrative arc that ends with punishment is the means by which the gangster's excesses are reigned in. However, there is an underlying tension in the genre between the moral demands of the narrative and the pleasure viewers take in the gangster's transgressions. In gangster films, the constant threat that the celebration of vice will bust through the thin walls of the moral narrative gets displaced onto the city. The modern chaotic city of the gangster film is often the extratextual and ultimate source of evil *and* the force that delivers the final punishment. As Jack Shadoian notes, "all gangster films are set in the period when the frontier has long been closed and all possibilities for heroic progress, but one — making it in the city — have shriveled away" (6). The gangster must be punished not because he kills but because his illicit and remunerative relationship to the city exposes the fundamental contradiction of American capitalism: the idea that anyone, regardless of class, can legally achieve wealth exists alongside the idea that most people must and do remain poor (Shadoian 5–6).

*The Warriors* film avoids this bleak outcome, and in doing so, it fails to offer the moral containment of the conventional gangster film. Noted by some critics at the time and readily apparent to anyone watching the film today is the curious disjuncture between *The Warriors*' playful tone and the effect many believed the film's representation of violence had on its viewers (Canby 19; Maslin 10). Responding to the reported violence, Vincent Canby writes, "[*The Warriors*] is such a mish-mash of romantic clichés, moods and visual effects that it's difficult to understand how it could inflame anyone not a close relative of a cast or crew member" (19). In the film, ultimately all that comes between racial harmony and the underclass taking control of the city is a truly despicable gang of white guys who are defeated in the end, while the Warriors walk triumphantly into the sunrise. To a degree, then, the panic around the film's release can be understood as a response to what it *did not* depict rather than what it did. Deviating from convention, the film fails to punish its protagonists for plotting to take over the city, thus leaving open the distinct possibility that this will happen after the credits roll.

Panicked reactions to *The Warriors* video game demonstrated similar expectations of how narrative should morally order and contain representations

of urban violence. On the same day that NIFM held their press conference on Capitol Hill, The Family Media Guide (FMG), a related media watchdog group, distributed their own list of "reprehensible" games. Among the games on FMG's list were *The Warriors*, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, *NARC*, *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, *Crime Life*, and *True Crime: New York City*. As many in the gaming press have noted, in 2005 there were bloodier and more ideologically suspect games being sold than those that made the FMG and NIFM lists, suggesting these lists demonstrate quite particular concerns — concerns tied to representations of urban crime that, in the video games, lack clear narrative containment. This is expressed in the following descriptions from the FMG:

*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* — ...Player can wreak as much havoc as he likes without progressing through the game's storyline....

*The Warriors* — Based on a '70s action flick that set new standards for "artistic violence," ... Player issues several commands to his gang, including "mayhem," which causes the gang to smash everything in sight....

*Crime Life: Gang Wars* — ...Player can roam the streets and fight or kill anyone in sight for no apparent reason. (Family Media Guide)

The FMG expresses moral outrage at the apparent lack of order in these games. These games facilitate violent gameplay without a clear narrative framework such as war or alien invasion. It is not just a disordered narrative structure that FMG is responding to, but also the disorder that is mirrored by the games' stereotypically racialized, decaying, and crime-ridden urban spaces. It is instructive to consider how in 2005, once again, images of young Black and Latino men in the city (now computer generated and available for interactive and immersive relations of cross-racial and ethnic identification) were circulated in the halls of power and through media as signs of crisis and disorder.

Though contemporary urban crime games, a 1970s teen action movie, and 1930s gangster films are different things, their cultural roles as targets of moral outrage and sites of popular pleasure are imbricated through their images of disorder, urban and otherwise. It is easy to understand the moral outrage elicited by urban crime games as simply a response to their depiction of violence and the social scenarios they represent. However, in drawing out the relationship between gangster films and urban crime games, it becomes clear that the outrage and the pleasure urban crime games elicit are similarly about the ideological relationships they create between player, narrative, and space. As will be argued in the next section, in its film iteration *The Warriors* offers a purposefully playful and unrealistic image of urban crisis to present the strategies of the gang as the preferred method of urban reform.



## Playing (in) the City

*The Warriors* video game does not just remake the film, but its narrative and gameplay structures also revise and expand the story. The video game transforms New York City from a space to be played *in* to a space *to be played*. To understand this changed relationship between medium, space, and play, first consider how the film establishes the city as a playground before turning to how the video game's interactivity changes the ideological terms of the film.

In *The Warriors* film, when all of the gangs arrive in the Bronx for Cyrus's meeting, they gather around a wooden playground structure upon which Cyrus climbs to address the gangs. Later, the Warriors regroup at the Union Square subway station and are attacked by a rival gang in a subterranean video game arcade. In the scene, the Warriors' leader, Swan, lingers in front of the arcade game Mr. Top Gun. During the scene, the arcade's sign — the word "PLAYLAND" in all capital letters — is visible behind the action. Whether a park playground or video game arcade it is notable that, in a film so invested in a notion of urban crisis, critical scenes take place in spaces designated for play and amusement. *The Warriors* begins and ends in Coney Island, the home turf of the protagonists. As such, Coney Island serves as a framing geography for the film that colors our understanding of the rest of the film's space and events. In fact, the film's first image is of the Wonder Wheel, the amusement park Ferris wheel that dominates the Coney Island skyline. Andrew Lazlo's cinematography captures the wheel's lights against an ink-black sky. Coney Island itself connotes a place of bawdy, maybe even slightly dangerous, fun in a neighborhood that has for well over a century simultaneously connoted "the city" and something separate from it. It is historically and representationally New York's playground, as well as a literal and metaphorical boundary marker; it is the urban periphery, the end of the subway line, and where the city runs out of space and into the ocean. The Bronx playground and Coney Island serve as two poles between which the Warriors and the narrative itself must move, establishing games and play as explicit and implicit tropes.<sup>5</sup> In the film, games and play are what mark New York City as a fantasy space — rather than a crisis space. The city is transformed into a playground, where those marginalized by authorities and the upper classes play at power, and in which their play promises real change.

*The Warriors* is unconvincing about its indexical relationship to actual urban experience, and this is precisely what makes it a transgressive representation of the city. Veering wildly from verisimilitude, the opening sequence establishes the gamespace of the film by introducing the teams, the players, and the rules of the game. Through a series of cross cuts, we see the gangs



donning their matching uniforms and making their way into the subway system. Lessening any potential threat the absurd gangs might pose to an audience's notion of civic order, the voiceover during the sequence makes clear that there are rules (established by Cyrus) by which the gangs are playing. First, only nine delegates from each gang may attend the meeting. Second, there are no weapons allowed. The sequence visually reinforces the sense of order implied by these rules by repetitively showing the gang members' orderly procession through the subway station turnstile area. In one shot, a hoodlum buys nine tokens and individually drops them in the slot for each member of his gang. The joke here is that viewers expect these delinquents to jump over the turnstile rather than paying the subway fare. The film remakes New York City at a time when the city's image is overwhelmingly dominated by economic collapse, government corruption, violence, decaying infrastructure, and abject poverty. Rather than offering a representation that is the opposite of these images, the film works within a hyperbolic vision of urban disorder, transforming the rhetoric of urban disorder into urban play.

The opening sequence also sets up the central role that New York City subway trains play in the film's articulation of the urban playground. On the heels of the Wonder Wheel shot, the film shifts to an image of the green-hued fluorescent lights of the D-train snaking into the Stillwell Avenue station accompanied by the menacing notes of the film's score. Point-of-view shots of trains barreling through subway tunnels and slow pans across the subway system map dominate the opening sequence. The insistent, repetitive pans over the subway map establish the complex and vast space through which the Warriors must travel. Further, the map images suggest that, as in the world of a video game, the ability to read the map links directly to the ability to navigate through the world masterfully. The city's multi-level labyrinthine subway stations also serve as spatial metaphors of hierarchical urban power relations. Significantly, the trains repeatedly fail the Warriors by literally not moving, halting the narrative and then dumping the boys into the streets for a fight number.

In *The Warriors* film, the trains function as literal extensions of the amusement park out into the city, and they connote a sense of connectivity in the urban fabric that mirrors the medium of film itself. When the Warriors board the train and depart Coney Island for the Bronx, the train, covered in colorful graffiti, seems akin to the track-bound amusement park rides surrounding it. The train becomes an extension of the Coney Island playscape into the rest of the city. The trains also literally and figuratively move the film's narrative along. With their long segmented bodies, like strips of celluloid, the trains connect each stop and each scene to the next, whereas the colorful graffiti covering the interior and exterior of the trains speaks to the city's failing infrastructure.

But the graffiti are also signs of resistance and a powerful mode of communication being mobilized by the urban underclass. Thus, the trains are the film's most powerful symbol of an equalizing, alternative public culture and of collective action against oppressive urban policies and conditions.

The city we see in *The Warriors* film is conventionally gritty, but the narrative and *mise-en-scène* suggest that this — that which is derogatively called “disorder” — is the context within which the city may be transformed from below. As the graffiti on the trains can be read as a response from below to the disorder above, the gangs in *The Warriors* remake the city through spatial appropriation, calling to mind Michel de Certeau's ideas about *bricolage* and the transformation of urban space through appropriation (91–110; 115–130). In *Taking the Train*, Joe Austin's social history of graffiti in New York City, he argues that writing on the trains emerged as part of a “powerful desire to speak to the entire city in new terms, and from a different perspective” (4). Austin continues,

Writers saw themselves as embodying an (illegal) urban beautification and education program for a fading city bent on denying its own magnificent cultural dynamics and destroying its own “local color,” both figuratively and literally. In taking the trains, writers created a new mass media, and in that media they “wrote back” to the city [4].

Beyond the literal graffiti in *The Warriors*, the gangs, with their colorful outfits and playfully made-up faces, are literal embodiments of local color and their movements through the city re-inscribe the dark, grey spaces of decay. Thus, the film's vision of urban reform from below is a wholly frightening one for those invested in narratives of urban pathology that overlook spaces where, under difficult circumstances, people successfully and playfully inhabit the city. By the early 1980s, graffiti on the trains would become the test case for the zero tolerance policies that partially paved the way for the transformation of New York City in the 1990s to a whitewashed metropolis made “safe” for the return of wealthy inhabitants and tourists.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Austin explains that, “graffiti” became one of several symbols promoted as a stand-in for the sense that something fundamental had gone wrong, and its removal from the subways in the 1980s presented a visible task that could measure the tangible progress of elite efforts to right the wrongs that elites themselves had created” (5).

A scene towards the end of the film illustrates the degree to which the trains function as an important and contested space. As the gang, bruised and exhausted, rides an empty train toward home, they are joined by a gregarious foursome of white youth ending a night out. The young men and women are dressed in formal wear, signaling a higher class affiliation than the gang's.

They look nervously around them and are clearly uncomfortable in the presence of the scruffy and bloodied men and woman. In a shot-reverse-shot sequence, one of the finely-dressed women looks dismissively at Mercy, the tough girl Swan befriends during the night. Mercy responds to the gaze by self-consciously touching her disheveled hair. Seeing the exchange, Swan silently stops Mercy mid-gesture, gently pushing her hand back down, implying that Mercy should not feel inferior. Without exchanging any words, the fancy young couples flee the train at the next stop. The scene is supposed to silently signal the gang's pride in the face of class and race prejudice. Though the scene occurs just before the final battle, it establishes that the Warriors are, in fact, already victorious in that they occupy a space that those more conventionally powerful are too afraid to take away from them. Like the rest of the film, this scene is notable because it restages the terms of white flight as they are often articulated in Hollywood films. Countless films about urban misadventures have been told from the perspective of the white and/or suburban protagonists who take a wrong turn in the city and encounter all sorts of violence and disorder, thus reaffirming their fears of the city in the first place. Here, though, viewers' identification is squarely with the Warriors (and with the city), and the white interlopers appear doughy, judgmental, and weak.

**“Warr-i-ors, come out to plaaay-ay!”**

The film narrative moves with the Warriors, and their successful navigation and occupation of the city is linked to the story's sense of justice at the end — an implied continuation of the story where Cyrus's truce and control of the city are realized. When the Warriors return to Coney Island, the Rogues, the gang that assassinated Cyrus at the beginning of the film, are waiting for them. In a demented sing-song cadence, the Rogues leader, Luther, invites them to brawl with film's most iconic line: “Warr-i-ors, come out to plaaay-ay!”

In *The Warriors* film, “play” is multivalent and politically transgressive. In *The Warriors* video game, play is wrested from the field of signification and turned over to the *player's* thumbs. This difference between the film and the game has implications for how images of urban disorder function for each. The tropes of games and play from the film are clearly retained in the video game adaptation of *The Warriors*. The film's playgrounds are digitally recreated into settings for the game's interactive brawls, while additional nods to games and play are interspersed throughout. For example, in the opening cutscene on Level One, the character Vermin plays pinball, and the player's tutorial



takes place in the back alley of an abandoned Coney Island bumper car ride. Like the film, the game signals play through aspects of mise-en-scène and narrative; however, in the video game, play-as-a-trope (at the level of representation) is twinned by play-as-an-action (at the level of interactivity).

The difference between how urban disorder functions in the film as opposed to how it functions in the game is partially expressed through narrative. For example, on the Blackout Level, the game uses the 1977 power failure as a historical referent for the action, despite the fact that the game's events take place in 1979. In the cutscene introducing the level, we see Vermin, Snow, and Ash board an empty, graffiti-covered subway train to the Riverside neighborhood. As happens in several scenes in the film, the train fails them. It stops moving and the lights flicker. The power is out and the gang must exit the train into the dark tunnel. On-screen text instructs the player to "Get to the streets to check things out." Once on the street, the player sees buildings on fire and people running around carrying items they have looted from stores. The text instructs the player to "Smash and loot your way through Riverside." The main action on this level involves getting points for looting from stores, destroying property (breaking car windows, etc), and mugging people on the streets. Neither Vermin, Snow, and Ash's actions nor the riot are explained. Furthermore, the game fails to make any explicit connections between the riot and Cyrus's meeting about taking over the city three months later. Instead, the Blackout level re-inserts, and restages through interactivity, images of an out-of-control underclass "wilding" in the diseased city. These were the very images that *The Warriors* film avoided and countered with images of play.

Another example of the game's narrative disjuncture between the gangs/player's actions and the larger historical and social context of the setting is found in the way the game represents graffiti. One of the main actions a player must learn is how to write the gang's name in spray paint. On Level Three, "Payback," the player's mission is to tag over a rival gang's graffiti around Coney Island. By Level Thirteen, "All City," the player's mission has been expanded to tagging subway trains to take the Warriors name "all city." Despite the cutscene that begins Level Thirteen by depicting Cyrus sending out emissaries to spread the word about the meeting he has called, there is no explicit connection between the act of writing and a larger social struggle. The act of writing in the game is made possible only as part of a chain of criminal actions. Players must steal car stereos in order to buy paint and they are inevitably drawn into violent battles over the locations chosen for their graffiti. Graffiti in the game is solely about inter-gang warfare, rather than a medium of urban transformation and resistance.<sup>7</sup>

While these differences of narrative and representation are important, the relationship *The Warriors* video game establishes between interactivity



and urban disorder is a more fundamental difference from the film. As in the film, the New York City subway system is central to understanding the game's structure. The game's opening cutscene lovingly recreates the film's opening sequence: the POV shots of trains speeding along their underground tracks, intercut with pans across the 1979 New York City subway system map. Beyond the visual similarity, though, the video game's very interactivity hinges on the trains. The cutscene that begins the Blackout level ends when Vermin breaks the glass in the back door of the train and exits. The screen goes black. When the story resumes, the image presents all the signifiers of interactivity: the health meters, inventory, and map of the heads-up display. The player is aware that the video game has switched from the cinematic coding of the cutscene to the machinic gaze of the game while it waits for the player to push a button. The train, on this level and many others, mediates this shift to interactivity. Whereas, in the film, the trains signal the machine of cinematic narrative, in *The Warriors* game the trains signal the machine of digital interactivity.

Alexander Galloway describes the disembodied "machinic gaze" of a video game as that which we become aware of when the console is turned on and the game is loaded, but no one is playing (40). There are moving images on the screen and there may be music other sounds, yet the game does not progress in any fashion. Digital processes keep the game in a state of visible readiness, but, for Galloway, this state is akin to a computer's screensaver mode (40–41). When the player picks up the controller and begins to play, the images and sound continue, but they have been transformed by interactivity from the machinic gaze to the subjective gaze of the player controlling the movement of the game's "camera." This transition from machinic to subjective gaze in video games is crucial for understanding how video games address and interpolate their users. Galloway's notion of the machinic gaze in video games creates a distinction between an incomplete state within the game before the player picks up the controls and a complete state of play once the player is pushing buttons. Rather than considering the separation of these states as inherent to interactivity, it is more useful to see how games mediate our perception of a shift between cinematic spectatorship and play. This vacillation between a sense of control and a sense of mastery is the very way the player is immersed into the interactive narrative. There is an alternation in all video games between looking and doing. New Media theorist Lev Manovich has discussed this relationship between looking and doing as a fundamental quality of all interactive media. He writes,

The screens keep alternating between the dimensions of representation and control. What at one moment was a fictional universe becomes a set of buttons that demand action.... By having periodically to complete the interactive text through active participation; the subject is interpolated in it.... The periodic

shifts between illusion and suspension are necessary to fully involve the subject in the illusion.... The user invests in the illusion precisely because she is given control over it [208–209].

The vacillation between looking and doing might be considered in terms of the relationship between cutscenes and regular interactive play in video games. During the cutscenes that set up the game or introduce new levels, players are invited to look but not play. Through looking, players are prepared for doing. What the cutscene lacks — interactivity — is promised by what is to come: the space for doing, the game itself. Manovich suggests that interactivity itself is part of the illusion of video games and all interactive digital media. Players are never fully in control. Nonetheless, the alternation between looking and doing creates an economy of visual plentitude versus interactive plentitude. One is always being traded for the other, and this back and forth is how players become invested in the fantasy that they author the game through their actions.

The New York City subway trains in *The Warriors* video game function as an interface between looking and doing. Cutscenes, like the trains they feature, are the vehicles that provide the connective material between each level of the game. The trains in the video game transport the player from level to level, but they always do so through non-interactive cutscenes that serve to set up the key moment of individualization in video games, the moment of interactivity. The promise of collective action at the core of the film — gangs as models for politics of affinity — comes undone in the game when the train stops and the cutscene ends. For example, on the Blackout level, when Vermin breaks the glass and exits the train, it is as if he has broken free of the temporal and spatial confinement of the cinematic and broken into the realm of the immediate and the interactive. Though Ajax and Snow follow Vermin, the player's actions are confined to the individual actions of Vermin. Reinforcing the individualization that takes place in the shift from the collective action in the cutscene, the on-screen text addresses “you,” the singular player. In *The Warriors* film, the trains stand for the uses of disorder through collective appropriation from below; in the video game, the subway system functions as a symbolic mediator of the transition from the viewer in the collective audience of cinema to the individual player addressed by the machinic gaze of the video game.

## Conclusion

*The Warriors* is a spatial story. Its narrative is organized according to the characters' trajectories across New York City. *The Warriors* is also a story about

two different fantasies of urban crisis. In the late 1970s, the film recast urban crisis as a problem to be solved through collective action from below to restore social justice. In the early twenty-first century, the video game recast urban crisis as a nostalgic representation of disorder in an overly sanitized urban and media landscape. Rather than thinking about the film and the video game as discrete objects, we can hold them together to see the long unfolding of a transmedia narrative. The temporality of the story's narrative arc — one long night in the late 1970s — becomes a discursive bridge between two historical moments across a twenty-five year gap, two different media, and two different subject positions: viewer and player. This last point, the shift from viewer to player, suggests that medium specificity still matters in the age of convergence. There are important ideological stakes as stories unfold across multiple media platforms. Together, *The Warriors* game and film act as a transmedia urban interface that speaks to cultural fears and desires about disorder in American cities. We can hear the famous provocation from the film, "Warr-r-i-ors, come out to plaay-ay!" as an invitation to reclaim a space for disorderly play in our increasingly order-based urban and media landscapes.

## NOTES

1. Many thanks to those who read and commented on this piece, especially Nic Sammond, Gretchen Papazian, and Joseph Michael Sommers.

2. For unclear reasons Rockstar also downgraded the numbers of the gangs from 100,000 (on the 1979 poster) to 60,000 (on the 2005 video game packaging).

3. Responding to the incidents, Paramount halted all advertising for *The Warriors* for six days after it was released, offered to release exhibitors from their contracts, and agreed to pay for additional security for those theaters that chose to screen it. Some smaller U.S. cities banned the film entirely, apparently out of concern that the film would bring its big city problems with it.

4. The bill, which later died in committee, called for fining retailers who sold video games rated "Mature" or "Adult Only" to minors.

5. These tropes are carried over from Sol Yurick's novel, in which the members of the central gang, the Dominators, are constantly playing games of "manhood" during their journey (who can hold their head out the subway window the longest, who can urinate the furthest, etc.).

6. Just a few years after *The Warriors* film was released, New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and Police Commissioner would use subway infractions like graffiti and fare evasion as the first testing ground of James Q. Wilson and George Kelling's highly influential and controversial "broken windows" theory of urban crime. Wilson and Kelling maintained that the appearance of neglect in the urban landscape (i.e., graffiti on subway trains) was a clear signal to inhabitants that crime would be tolerated. Wilson and Kelling's approach, as it was applied by the MTA and later by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, emphasized the importance of maintaining the appearance of order in the city by covering over graffiti, prosecuting the writers, and generally demonstrating zero tolerance for all small-scale crimes.

7. Compare this to *Getting Up*, another Playstation 2 game released the same year, which features a young graffiti artist (Trane) a fictional city (New Radius) that is modeled

on New York City. The game's cover explains that the mayor of the city has called to "Revive, Rebuild, and Renew," but Trane is "sickened by the governmental tyranny and the exploitation of the people. You must bring the war to the streets, uncover political scandals, and expose your leaders as corrupt. In the end you have only one goal: REVOLUTION!" (*Mark Ecco's Getting Up*).



## CHAPTER 7

# When Did Dante Become a Scythe-Wielding Badass? Modeling Adaption and Shifting Gender Convention in *Dante's Inferno*

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DENISE A. AYO

The 2010 release of Visceral Game's *Dante's Inferno* left many players and critics somewhat at odds. On the one hand, gamers unacquainted with the poem but familiar with the gaming genre complained that the combat layout and controls poorly mimicked those of Sony's *God of War* series. On the other, academics and casual readers familiar with *The Divine Comedy* openly wondered when Dante became a scythe-wielding badass and Beatrice a scantily-clad damsel in distress. However, the game's reception has been fairly positive overall, most reviewers describing it as a fun experience with amazing graphics.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as a recreational gamer, Dante fan, and devoted literary and gender studies scholar, I am left to wonder why this game does not offend me. In fact, it would be fair to say that I enjoy *Dante's Inferno* as a video game in its own right, as well as an adaptation of one of my favorite works of literature. In the same way that there is something oddly apropos about *Dante's Inferno* being a rip-off or retelling of a series inspired by Roman mythology (after all, Dante himself drew heavily from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Lucan's *Pharsalia*), Visceral presents a nuanced understanding of the *Inferno* despite — or perhaps because of — the game's changes to character and storyline. Dante's (d)evolution from a cowering poet to a fearless and brash crusader and Beatrice's, likewise, from an unsympathetic admiral to an abducted maiden are not crude debasements of the medieval

poem but rather the result of an elaborate, successful remediation through the lens of the current cultural moment.

To adapt the poem to a new format and to appeal to a new target audience of age 17+ gamers, Visceral's designers translate Dante's journey through Hell from a set of poetic conventions and sign systems to those of its new medium. They reimagine Dante's authorial intent, firmly-rooted in medieval thought and theology as it was, to save his readers from damnation through the poem's articulation of a strict moral code in order to create a message more applicable and palatable to modern thought and religious pluralism. Using recent developments in adaptation and video-game theory, I argue that *Dante's Inferno* exists as a successful and autonomous adaptation that also offers a critique of video-game conventions, especially in regard to gender and religion. Positing Dante's hyper-masculinization as a culturally important step in changing an art of words into an art of interaction, the game uses the medium's inherent reflexive relationship between avatar and player to compel players to question video-game gender stereotypes as Dante the crusader questions his own judgmental, violent, and lustful ways in a move analogous to how Dante the character (and, arguably, Dante the poet) examines the gravity behind his own sin of pride.

## Pop Dante and the Re-mediation:

### An Experience Made Again/Anew

In the February 26, 2010, edition of *Entertainment Weekly*, *Dante's Inferno* earned the status of what Jim Collins calls "high-pop" — a reversal of Pop Art's "taking forms of popular iconography into the rarefied realm of museum art ... [and instead] transforming *Culture* into mass entertainment" (Collins 6). The magazine features a full-page color advertisement/critique of the game entitled "An Ivy League Professor Weighs In." Under the subtitle "Expert View," *Entertainment Weekly* reports that "after *watching* a portion of the game," Columbia University professor and former president of the Dante Society of America, Teodolinda Barolini, "was not thrilled" (79, emphasis added). Despite Barolini's incomplete ("a portion of the game") and inaccurate (watching instead of playing) experience of the game, *Entertainment Weekly* presents her truncated words as the professorial judgment of *Dante's Inferno*:

Of all the things that are troubling, the sexualization and infantilization of Beatrice are the worst. Beatrice is a human girl who is dead and is now an agent of the divine. She is not to be saved by him, she is *saving* him. That's the whole point! Here, she has become the prototypical damsel in distress. She's this kind

of bizarrely corrupted Barbie doll. Also, Dante has nothing to do with the Crusades. They completely invented this setting. It's just totally bogus [79].

Ironically, although few scholars would weigh in on a text without experiencing it in its entirety and in the way its medium demands, Barolini's fear that playing *Dante's Inferno* would not get anyone to "pick the original up," disgust at Beatrice's "sexualization and infantilization," and ultimate dismissal of the game as "totally bogus" succinctly expresses the major problems that scholars and casual readers alike have reported concerning the game (79).<sup>2</sup>

However, as Linda Hutcheon argues, a concern with fidelity to the "so-called original" is only one possible reaction to experiencing an adaptation — one that, she notes, "challeng[es] the authority of any notion of priority" (xiii). Posturing that "multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically," Hutcheon's arguments represent an important turn in adaptation theory (xiii). Namely, she moves to go beyond the fidelity argument that inherently privileges the "original" and provides the thrust behind critiques such as Barolini's. Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* discusses the who, what, when, where, and how of adaptation so as to create a foundational theory for adaptation, as well as establish it as a genre in its own right. Arguing a variety of motivations behind the production of adaptations not limited to the cynical charge of capitalism, Hutcheon characterizes three aspects of adaptation:

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
- A creative *and* an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work (8)

Arguably, adaptations are just as much about repetition as they are about change (9). Such a theory demands exploration of an adaptation's dialogue with the adapted text; in particular, its moments of homage and critique, as well as the modifications it makes for its new audience and, when applicable, new medium. In sum, the criterion of "fidelity" becomes overwhelmingly inadequate to discuss adaptations. Instead, as Hutcheon suggests, a more nuanced way to think about adaptation would be one that considers "the creativity and skill [used] to make the text one's own and thus autonomous" (20). The real question when passing an evaluative judgment on an adaptation should be how well it autonomously exists in its cultural context: can it create pleasure, if not meaningfulness to some degree or another, for audiences who know and those who don't know the adapted text?

From such a perspective, Visceral's *Dante's Inferno* offers itself as an example of a successful adaptation: it creates a systematic, one-to-one substitution of the sword — or, more accurately, scythe — for the pen. This global substitution functions as Visceral's translation of the poem from one set of conventions to another:

In many cases, because adaptations are to a different medium, they are re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images). This is translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding, that is, as necessarily a recording into a new set of conventions as well as signs [Hutcheon 16].

Part of this re-mediation, as Hutcheon goes on to suggest, is the move from a media based on “telling” to a media based on “interacting” (50–2). Thus, quite simply, to adapt a poem in which the protagonist walks around with his guide, discussing salvation and damnation, while the readers are told what transpires to a game in which the audience, i.e., players, control an avatar and its interactions with a virtual environment, game designers substitute action for much of the telling. Remarkably, through this substitution, designers accurately convert much of *The Divine Comedy*’s narrative eloquence and its protagonist’s inner turmoil to a format appealing to modern gamers. Rather than faint with mental exhaustion, Dante the crusader collapses from physical exertion; rather than verbally convince Hell’s minions to allow him passage, Dante the crusader slays all those who stand in his way.

This implicit communication with the poem, however, is not the only way the game extends itself to an intertextual engagement with Dante’s life, his poem, and other adaptations. *Dante’s Inferno*, though able to exist independently, acknowledges its adaptation status and its debt to another text. Beyond the title that signifies it as Visceral’s take on Dante’s *Inferno* (Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno*), the game’s website features a tab entitled “The Poem,” which displays sub-tabs that give a brief timeline of Dante Alighieri’s life, as well as a detailed discussion of *Inferno* and an overview of the other two books of *The Divine Comedy*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. The page also offers commentary, written by Guy P. Raffa, a Dante scholar at the University of Texas at Austin, and a selection of Gustave Dore’s pictorial adaptations of *The Divine Comedy*. In addition, users can find a link to Raffa’s multimedia reading guide to Dante’s poem, *Danteworlds*, as well as a link to its paperback companion for sale at amazon.com.

Nonetheless, as executive producer Jonathan Knight points out, the game is a creative and interpretative appropriation of the poem: “We are working hard to deliver the fantasy ‘go to Hell.’ We really want to bring to life this, this vision, this medieval vision of Hell, and do it justice in a really artistic way but also in a hard-hitting action way” (E3 2009 Video Interview). Dante in the game is not Dante the poet or Dante the character but rather a parallel Dante figure that adapts the poem to a new medium and a new context. Although they make no secret of the game’s creative lineage, the game designers clearly intend for the game to stand on its own. For example, while gamers



can purchase downloadable content (DLC) for the game that includes a “Florentine Dante Costume,” in the animated cutscenes and flashbacks in which the game gives story and character background, Dante remains a crusader in physique and garb. The game allows for *The Divine Comedy*’s Dantes, but it foregrounds its story of an impetuous crusader over that of a medieval poet and poet figure.<sup>3</sup>

But why is Visceral’s Dante so much more visceral than its namesake? As Keith Staskiewicz remarks after examining the game, “it looks like there will be a lot less introspection and whole lot more decapitation” (*Entertainment Weekly*). Although this comment is intended to be negative, Visceral’s translation of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* into *Dante’s Inferno*—a translation from the vernacular of medieval Italy to a vernacular of today—is both effective and exhaustive.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the stunning graphics that vividly portray, for example, the lasciviousness of lust and the corporeal grossness of gluttony transpose Dante’s exquisite and intense poetry to a different sign system, clever re-imaginings of Hell’s inhabitants communicate Dante’s indelible *contrapasso* while creating a playable video game and recontextualizing the poet’s overarching message.<sup>5</sup> Some, such as Christopher M. McDonough, find this shift represents an egregious flaw in the game. According to Dave Itzkoff’s summation in “Abandon All Poetry, but Enter Hell with an Attitude,”

Mr. McDonough said that the fundamental proposition of “Inferno” was entirely different from that of a video game. “While it is fantastically imaginative, it is ultimately frustrating.... You’re pushing your rock from one side of the circle to the other, for eternity. What could be more frustrating? Whereas the point of the game is satisfaction—to win, to achieve the quest” [Itzkoff].

Ignoring McDonough’s confusion of the role of Dante the character with those who are punished in *Inferno* (for Dante, there is an end, i.e., Paradise), his allusion to the punishment of the Avaricious and the Prodigal actually points to a particularly poignant example of how *Dante’s Inferno* translates *Inferno* into its new medium. In the game, the Greed-specific enemy, the Hoarder-Waster, though serving the basic function of a video-game enemy, i.e., trying to prevent the player/avatar from advancing by lowering the avatar’s health to zero, elegantly adheres to the Avaricious and the Prodigal’s *contrapasso*. Rather than have the two competing sins continually crash into each other as they try to roll a boulder around a circular path in opposite directions, the game presents the Hoarder-Waster as two souls joined at the hip whose attack is to spin in circles, randomly hurting anything that gets in its way. In other words, the flaws that some scholars have fixed on turn out to have an obvious relationship with the poem, supporting rather than detracting from the game’s effectiveness as an adaptation.

Adding to *Dante’s Inferno*’s complex engagement with the poem, the

player is given the sacrilegious, as far as Dante the poet might be concerned, option of choosing whether to “absolve” or “punish” 27 damned souls that are featured in *Inferno*. These figures do not try to fight but merely crouch in their respective circles, lamenting their sins. As Dante approaches them, he can listen as they cycle through a narrative of their indiscretions and the motivations that drove them. Once Dante is close enough, the player can press a button to make Dante aggressively grab the shade. This action prompts a message that names the shade and its specific sin, as well as gives the player the option to “absolve” or “punish” the soul. The player then watches as the shade either ascends into the light, thanking Dante and/or God, or is skewered and torn in half by Dante’s scythe.

Although some gamers may enjoy the gruesome display that results from punishing a shade, the game design encourages players to absolve beings when given the chance. While players receive a trophy or an achievement for simply absolving or punishing all 27 shades, they receive additional trophies or achievements for absolving Paolo, Francesca, and, on the Xbox 360 platform, Brunetto Latini. Coupled with these incentives, the game suggests that forgiveness, though more difficult than punishing one’s enemies, yields greater rewards. It illustrates forgiveness as a more difficult but satisfying process through a mini-game in which players “capture” sins and can potentially earn more points than they would if they selected to punish the soul. In addition, when Dante finds and absolves shades, the player’s pay-off is a journal entry with a thumbnail biographical sketch and artistic rendering of the soul’s human form. As Knight comments, “It’s hard to be holy, but the reward is greater” (Heresy Developer’s Diary). Consequently, absolving shades adds significantly to the power of Dante’s “holy” weapon while punishing them adds to his “unholy” one, making Dante, as lead designer Steve Desilets suggests, “more like the devil every step of the way” (Heresy Developer’s Diary).

Flashbacks reveal to players that, while fighting in the Crusades, Dante had a penchant for puritanically condemning his enemies as heretics and sentencing them to death. Gamers also learn that this self-righteous judgment contributes to Dante’s long-list of damning sins. By encouraging gamers to find and either absolve or punish all 27 souls, the game asks players to assume, with Dante, a rather God-like authority, provoking them to consider the moral implications of such judgments. Such a presumption stands at odds with the views of Dante the poet. In *Inferno*, the protagonist is frequently warned against and even virulently reprimanded by Virgil for showing pity towards the shades in Hell. To question a soul’s place in Hell is to question divine authority; these souls were given free will by God and chose to turn their back on him, thus earning their damnation. But this is in a cosmology where God is all-powerful, and Lucifer is the very definition of impotence.<sup>6</sup>

Coinciding with modern conceptions of the devil and video-game conventions, Lucifer in the game, though physically trapped in Judecca, can project his image anywhere. He taunts Dante throughout the latter's journey through Hell and acts as the game's final boss: he plays the role of the ever-present video-game villain. In giving Lucifer agency, the designers allow for the questioning of authority; the choice to absolve souls (rather than accept their damnation) becomes a matter of the devil's authority rather than God's. In addition, removing God from Hell allows for complex considerations of morality and the existence of multiple religions that the poet's Catholic structure prohibits. Accordingly, it is the souls of those who the crusader absolves that ultimately defeat Lucifer.<sup>7</sup> Although Dante beats Lucifer in combat, it is the absolved souls that imprison the devil once again and allow Dante to escape.

### Hero and Muse, Badass and Damsel: Remaking Gender

The Visceral Dante we meet contemplating middle age in a dark forest while stitching a cloth cross onto his bare chest is a far cry from the trembling character we meet in *Inferno*'s opening pages. In the words of Desilets, "Dante is a no holds barred, unrelenting, never gonna say die, just not going to give in ... kinda a brutal bastard" (Greed Developer's Diary). Players soon learn that, in *Dante's Inferno*, Dante's story begins when he leaves his betrothed to fight in the Crusades. Hyper-masculine and bent on avenging what he decides are others' wrongs, the game's Dante is consistent with the figure typically at the center of conventional hero narratives. But, as players also soon learn, this crusader's "heroics" are less laudable than originally imagined. Producer Justin Lambros explains these changes to Dante's character:

The thing about Hell is that it is hard to find someone who can stand up to all that, and that's really what the impetus was to make our character as badass as he became. The poet as he goes through hell is fainting and Virgil picks him up and carries him over spots, and that is not a character we can use for a hero [Greed Developer's Diary].

To create an appropriate "hero" for their video game, as Lambros goes on to recount, they designed a bad, bloody, superhuman crusader who literally sows (and sews) his sins and wears them on his sleeve — or rather, chest. Conversely, the game's Virgil serves a purpose similar to the one that the Roman poet does in *Inferno*, giving Dante information about each circle and the sinners who reside there. However, this virtual Virgil is not without his own muscular physique and special power-boosting relics to give to players who allow him to finish his lectures.



With Dante's and Virgil's new muscles come new ways to deal with creatures that try to impede their progress. As many Dante scholars highlight, the moment outside of the Gates of Dis represents an important portrayal of Virgil as fallible in his role of physical and literary guide.<sup>8</sup> For the first time since they began their trek, Virgil's rhetoric fails to convince Hell's minions to allow Dante passage. In the game, however, Dante enters Dis by way of brute force. He first slays waves of enemies and then climbs atop a giant Pheylgus's head (who until this moment was indiscriminately pounding the ground with his fist) to ride the sub-boss of Anger through Dis's gates, smashing several pillars and enemies along the way.

Using force instead of rhetoric to enter Lower Hell, Dante's actions display how the game's substitution of sword for pen implies not only physical but mental changes to the Dante figure. While Knight proposes that his character is guilty of all nine sins, the game reveals that Dante is predominately guilty of the more animalistic, the more visceral, sins described in *Inferno* (Greed Developer's Diary). Although a few flashbacks reveal Dante's treachery at the expense of Beatrice's brother and his violence in the name of God, the majority of them depict Dante wallowing in lust, gluttony, greed, and anger rather than the pride that weighs most heavily upon Dante in the poem.<sup>9</sup> Also emphasizing this difference, the game replaces *Inferno*'s 10 bolges of Malebolge with 10 rounds of arena-style fighting in which Dante is expected to demonstrate an array of fighting skills. Notably, Dante the character meets Ulysses in the eighth bolge. Dante the poet fabricates a Ulysses who can act as a counterexample to the character's and the poet's deep-seated pride.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the character's journey is willed by God and blessed by three heavenly ladies, Ulysses undertakes his final voyage out of vain curiosity and a desire to outdo the gods (*Inf.* 2.94–117). The poet is in the midst of using his literary prowess to lead his readers to salvation, while Ulysses enlists fellow sailors to accompany him through the ill use of his renowned oratory skills (*Inf.* 26.90–142).<sup>11</sup> In the eighth bolge, Dante the character, whose journey we experience through poetry and dialogue, confronts his core sin, the cerebral sin of pride and the related potential to commit fraud through words. But rather than present Malebolge as it does the other circles (environments visually and audibly emoting with the level's specific sin), *Dante's Inferno* demands that players in this level showcase the fighting skills that they have honed and developed throughout the game. In the game, Dante must face a culmination of his carnal sins in the same circle in which Dante in the poem confronts his pride.

Although assistant producer for EA games Tracy Espeleta contends that Visceral's character is "definitely not some straight action hero," and Knight wants to see something human in his superhuman hero, the many changes that Visceral introduces makes *Dante's Inferno* perhaps one of the most stereo-



typical examples of a game in the action and adventure genre (Greed Developer's Diary). In addition to pumping Dante full of testosterone, game designers offer up a highly-sexualized damsel in distress for its hyper-masculine hero to save by wielding his giant scythe. Beatrice becomes a scantily-clothed pawn to be fought over by the hero and villain. Notably, it is these drastic re-characterizations that garner the most criticism of any of the designers' changes to the adapted text.

As Benjamin Popper notes, a hero saving a damsel in distress is a quintessential feature of the video games that are "coarsening our culture" (*The Atlantic*). Consequently, the recurring violence and female objectification in video games continue to be the focus of a wide variety of critics from a wide variety of backgrounds. Speaking from the perspective of video-game scholarship, Ewan Kirkland summarizes,

Those mentioning masculinity largely conclude that video games contain regressive models of male behavior characterized by aggression, domination, and heterosexualized superiority to women. The masculinity of video-game culture, pervading broader game structures and goals, results in the predominance of violence, conquest, and militaristic action as the preferred mode of interactive engagement. All, it is argued, contributes to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity [177–8].

Suggesting, however, that "such analyses do not acknowledge the complexities and contradictions in the images of masculinity on the screen, the narratives of masculinity in which they are situated, or the masculine positions game-players adopt in relation to specific games, genres, or franchises," Kirkland shows that games do not always support the heterosexual norm and, in fact, occasionally portray "alternate masculinities that challenge prevailing stereotypes of the medium" (178). Similarly, but dealing with heroes more in tune with Dante in *Dante's Inferno* than the mentally troubled and physically inadequate men of *Silent Hill*, Derek Burrill suggests that "games can be understood as a complicated and slippery space of masculine performance" (92). He continues by explaining that the "self-reflexively masochistic formation between player and avatar ... supports a variety of readings, performances and positions instead of a singular, totalizing and dominant meaning" (101). Thus, perhaps, we can understand *Dante's Inferno's* almost-comical adherence to its medium's gender stereotypes as an attempt to critique them — not reinforce them.

The game's frame story gives players the impression that Beatrice is a weak, helpless, and frequently unclothed damsel kidnapped by Lucifer whose only hope is the heroics of her muscular fiancé. These conceptions are supported by the cutscene in Gluttony that displays Beatrice's murder in which the assailant "accidentally" rips her dress to expose her left breast. Dante later

(chronologically not sequentially) finds this bare-breasted corpse of his fiancée only to see her naked spirit rise from her body and then be swept away by Lucifer. Naturally, a chase ensues with Beatrice's cries for help echoing in Dante's (and the player's) ears.

Although this sequence and the preliminary plot could not be any more stereotypical, as the player navigates deeper into Visceral's Hell, the game begins to suggest that perhaps Dante's purpose is *not* to save Beatrice. While Lucifer's words during the final battle contend that Beatrice functioned as bait to lure Dante to the center of Hell so that he can free Lucifer, several exchanges between Virgil and Dante along the way suggest an overarching purpose that is less objectifying and more akin to the poem's portrayal of Beatrice. When Dante first meets Virgil in the game, Virgil tells him that his presence is the result of Beatrice's urging: "A lady called. I prayed for her to command me.... 'I fear my friend has gone astray,' she said. 'Help him, Virgil, so that he can come to me. I am Beatrice, and when I am finally before my Lord, I will praise you to him'" (*Dante's Inferno*). Less the words of a damsel in distress and more the words of a blessed lady wanting to help her friend, this exchange between Beatrice and Virgil, presented by the latter, coincides with the way Virgil speaks about Beatrice in the poem (*Inf.* 2.58–74). Under-scoring this, as Virgil speaks of Beatrice, players see a serene image of her. Her naked body is desexualized by overemphasizing her veins while a cross imprinted on her forehead and radiant light in the background connote divine agency. Gamers are left to wonder when, in between being murdered and being dragged to hell, Beatrice got the chance to calmly — and with Heaven as her backdrop — ask for Virgil's assistance in helping Dante.

As Dante descends deeper into hell, Virgil offers words of encouragement that support the argument that Dante is on a journey willed by God to save himself: "Let not Plutus, the God of Wealth, hinder your passage, whatever power the accursed wolf may have.... Your journey is willed on high, where Michael did avenge the proud rebellion"; "When you come before the radiant Beatrice, you will know your life's journey" (*Dante's Inferno*).<sup>12</sup> Complicating matters even further, in the Forest of Suicides, Dante's mother goads her son to save the innocent Beatrice; however, this plea comes at the end of a conversation in which she claims responsibility for her own damnation and rebukes stereotypically feminine weakness:

DANTE'S MOTHER: I despised your father's cruelty. But I was too weak to defy him. And so ... I took my own life.... And you. You've learned his ways.

DANTE: Forgive me.

MOTHER: The fault is mine. I had not the courage to protect you. Can you forgive me?

DANTE: I should have... Mother, why did I lose everything?

MOTHER: Some men change, son. Others become the man they once were — the man they wish to be.

DANTE: Beatrice was all I had. Why did I betray her?

MOTHER: It is too late for us, son. But there is still time for her. Absolve me.

My soul belongs to you. You **MUST** save Beatrice. She is innocent [*Dante's Inferno*].

Dante's mother emphasizes ownership of one's actions. She only makes the abrupt shift to Beatrice and her son's supposedly inevitable fate following Dante's insistence. She then immediately contradicts her claim that "It is too late for us" with her command, "Absolve me." This dialogue seems to enact Dante's struggle with his adherence to the stereotypical hero role that has brought him to this point. It highlights the possibility that his descent is not about saving Beatrice but about saving himself. Perhaps in a scenario where Dante is a womanizer and violent man like his father, the only way for Beatrice to serve as a conduit for his salvation is to participate in the hero narrative that has damned him in the first place.

It is only after Dante relinquishes this role that Beatrice is saved. After completing the 10 trials of Malebolge, Dante falls to his knees before Beatrice, saying "I give up on this journey ... I am truly sorry for what I have done. May you one day forgive me" (*Dante's Inferno*). It is at this point that Beatrice is transformed back into an innocent soul, and a heavenly messenger comes to carry her to heaven. Beatrice leaves the story; she is in Heaven — or has she always been in Heaven? — and Dante is still in Hell and must continue to travel deeper. Players only see Beatrice again after Dante has faced and defeated Lucifer. In this cutscene, Beatrice lowers her hand to lead a naked and compliant Dante, who closes his eyes to signal a relinquishment of agency, to Purgatory.

Like the scene with Dante's mother, the game oscillates between supporting and dismantling stereotypical gender roles, ultimately leaving gamers to ponder how they should understand the game. It is easy to suggest that to make the game appeal to its market; to make it "a lot more fun for the player," Visceral creates a badass and a damsel ("Preview: *Dante's Inferno*"). But to attribute these changes purely to capitalism and the inherent masochism of the video-game genre discounts the self-reflexive dimension of both the poem and the game. Self-reflection while reading the poem is unavoidable: Dante Alighieri characterizes himself to serve as a first-person narrator with whom the reader can identify ("When I had journeyed half of *our* life's way" [*Inf.* 1.1, emphasis added,]). Similarly, scholars in both adaptation and video-game theory highlight the unique ability of the video-gaming medium to invoke player identification with the avatar.<sup>13</sup> To play *Dante's Inferno*, the player is asked to identify with a Dante who subscribes to hyper-masculine norms, a

character whose hero complex brought him to the Crusades and, consequently, Hell. At the game's opening, gamers are confronted with a typical scenario: the hero must save the captured princess. But as the game progresses, players are asked to question these norms and their role in their avatar's damnation.

## Conclusions: Salvation, Remediated

The poet of *Inferno* invites his readers to identify with his character so as to guide them to salvation. However, game designers, facing a religiously plural and global market, could not maintain Dante's thoroughly Catholic mission. Although explicitly structured around a Christian Hell, *Dante's Inferno* shows its awareness of its cultural context. In the way that the game seems to ironically adhere to video-game gender norms, it completely balks at stereotypical notions of political correctness. Brian Crecente argues,

the overt inclusion of a Christian Hell guided by Christian morality in a video game meant for a wide audience is a big deal. Not because of what it is saying about the afterlife, but because of what it says about the willingness of a publicly held, widely known game publisher to create something so steeped in controversy and not — beyond horrid marketing — allow that controversy to become the game. It manages to entertain and preach equally [*Kotaku*].

While the game does not allow “controversy to become the game,” I would argue that, rather than “preach,” it asks players to question moral certainties just as it does gender stereotypes. In fact, it may even be commenting on the morality of the latter by raising the former. Gamers find Dante's crusader comrades in hell.<sup>14</sup> Lucifer specifically problematizes the Crusades' higher purpose before showing Dante the details of Beatrice's murder:

DANTE: I took up the Crusade. The Bishop assured us that our sins would be absolved.  
 LUCIFER: And you believed him? You actually believed these salesmen of salvation?  
 DANTE: And what of those lost souls that we killed? Where are they?  
 LUCIFER: They thought their cause was holy too.  
 DANTE: Where are they? Why do I not find them damned in the Inferno?  
 LUCIFER: Because this isn't their hell, it's yours [*Dante's Inferno*].

If anything, we could argue that Visceral's designers are trying to save gamers by asking them to question social and moral certainties about not only video games but modern society in general.

As Hutcheon suggests, the cultural context of an adaptation and how it affects the process of adaptation demands significant attention (xvi). *Dante's Inferno* asks players to think in complicated ways about medium and context.



By substituting a scythe for poetry, the game creates character motivation and engaging play value while also accessing an intricate negotiation of identity to provoke self-reflection and deeper thought in players who know and those who don't know the poem. Crecente concludes,

*Dante's Inferno* the video game is a metaphysical journey though and an animated illumination of medieval hell. It deals with morality and existentialism as aptly as it delivers an engrossing experience. It is not without its issues, it most certainly won't be for everyone, but it does something that very few video games do: It opens the door for moral introspection.

These remarks do not veer far from what Dante's *Inferno* asked of its lay audience in the fourteenth century. *Dante's Inferno* asks us to question ourselves and our expectations of video games: Should Beatrice be the saved or the saver? Is she a sexual object or someone liberated from society's gender constructions? Must games created for a global market neutralize religious difference, or can they ask players to think in more complex ways about religious intolerance? Ultimately, it is perhaps up to the player; as Knight says, "It's a highbrow/lowbrow project by design.... If you know [or even, as I argue, if you don't know] the poem, the game has a lot to offer. If you just want to mash buttons and kill demons, that's all it has to be for you" (Itzkoff).

#### NOTES

1. See for example the reviews published by SixthAxis ("Review: Dante's Inferno"), IGN ("Dante's Inferno Review"), and Gamespot ("Dante's Inferno Review").

2. Christopher M. McDonough expresses similar concerns in Dave Itzkoff's article "Abandon All Poetry, but Enter Hell with an Attitude."

3. Another DLC feature is an extra level, "Dark Forest." Importantly, as many gamers have pointed out, this level does not make sense as a prequel to the game proper but merely functions as another gesture towards the poem that also provides gamers another level.

4. "Ultimately, one of the most groundbreaking aspects of Dante's poem was its accessibility: he chose to write it in the vernacular, rather than in the more formal, elitist style of Latin that was then typical of literature dedicated to grand themes. (The language of his poem became the foundation for modern day Italian.) ... While *Dante's Inferno* the video game is certainly no classic, by updating the 700-year-old text into the vernacular of video gaming, it just might win over a new generation of readers. Indeed, among the game's more than 18,000 Facebook friends, many are expressing an interest in the original poem. 'You should really read the literature before playing the game,' wrote one Facebook fan. 'It's an awesome story.' Of course, the Facebook page also reveals how times have changed. 'A world without video games,' wrote another fan, 'now that would be like living in hell' (Popper).

5. For a brief explanation of Dante's *contrapasso*, see Lino Pertile or John A. Scott 198–99.

6. "The emperor of the despondent kingdom / so towered from the ice, up from mid-chest, ... Beneath each face of his, two wings spread out, / as broad as suited so immense a bird: ... and he was agitating them, / so that three winds made their way out from him — / and all Cocytus froze before those winds. He wept out of six eyes; and down three chins, / tears gushed together with a bloody froth" (*Inf.* 34.28–54).

7. The game forces players, through cutscenes, to absolve a few key figures that are not in *Inferno*: Dante's father and mother and Beatrice's brother.

8. See, for example, Scott 239–41 or Kevin Brownlee 143–7.

9. Notably, the flashbacks also occur with a higher frequency in Upper Hell.

10. Dante the poet makes no secret of his character's pride. For example, in *Purgatorio*, the character can already feel the weight of the Pridefuls' rocks upon his shoulders (*Purg.* 13.138).

11. For a brief discussion, see Scott 254–5.

12. As a comparison between Virgil's initial words to Dante the crusader and his words to Dante the character reveal, much of the dialogue in *Dante's Inferno* echoes that of *Inferno*. However, while occasionally quoting a direct phrase for the poem, the game only presents direct quotes from the *Inferno* in place of the stereotypical "Game Over" screen that appears when the avatar's health is reduced to zero. Intriguingly, the game's quotation of (on the "Game Over" screen), translation of (in its shortening and paraphrasing Virgil's dialogue), and repurposing of (Dante is a brash crusader not an introspective poet) *Inferno* recalls Dante Alighieri's stylized way of saying goodbye to Virgil in *Purgatorio*. As Virgil leaves the character's side in Terrestrial Paradise, the poet displays himself and his character surpassing their literal and figurative guide by first quoting Virgil's original Latin (*Purg.* 30.21), then translating his Latin into Italian (*Purg.* 30.48), and finally repurposing Virgil's words to express the situation in *Purgatorio* (words that described Orpheus's loss of Eurydice in Virgil's work become about Dante's loss of his guide Virgil [*Purg.* 30.49–51]).

13. See for example, Burrill, Hutcheon, and Kirkland.

14. Damned Crusaders and Damned Captains are the level-specific enemy of Violence. Dante the poet divides the seventh circle, Violence, between those who were violent *against* their neighbors, themselves or their possessions, and God (i.e., blasphemy, sodomy, and usury); however, the game's placement of the Damned Crusaders and Captains in its rendition of the fiery sands suggests that the sands also contain souls that were violent *in the name of* God.

## CHAPTER 8

# Some of This Happened to the Other Fellow: Remaking *GoldenEye 007* with Daniel Craig

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DAVID MCGOWAN<sup>1</sup>

*GoldenEye* (1995), the seventeenth entry in the James Bond film series, marked the character's return to the silver screen after more than six years — the longest production hiatus in his cinematic history. Not only did this new film have to carefully reposition Bond's status within the substantially changed world of the 1990s (following the fall of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, and so on), it also introduced a new star, Pierce Brosnan, as 007. Despite fears that Bond would no longer be relevant to a new generation, the film proved a success: James Chapman reports that *GoldenEye* "took more at the box-office than [the last two Bond films] combined" (212–213). The film also spawned a video game adaptation, *GoldenEye 007* (1997) for the Nintendo 64 (N64) console. The title operates as a First-Person Shooter (FPS), a game genre that integrates weapon-based combat within "a [three-dimensional] fictional world from the first-person view of the player-character," in this case James Bond (Tavinor 201). Like its parent film, the game vastly exceeded critical and, particularly, commercial expectations. As Chris Bateman and Richard Boon note, "sales of FPS games tend to top out at the 1–2 million mark," but *GoldenEye 007* "sold around 8 million copies" (233).

More than a decade later, Activision has revived the franchise with a new game for the Nintendo Wii console, also entitled *GoldenEye 007* (2010).<sup>2</sup> The Wii title has drawn a significant amount of attention and even some controversy for its decision to feature the current Bond film star, Daniel Craig, as its playable representation of 007. The direct interplay between the cinematic

and gaming franchises is itself nothing new: Bond games have frequently been based on existing films, and incorporate the specific likeness of the particular title's actor to emphasize this link (*GoldenEye 64* and its use of Pierce Brosnan being a case in point). Other games have drawn upon this iconography to develop original storylines designed to complement, rather than simply mimic, the cinematic universe. What makes *GoldenEye Wii* unique, then, is its explicit *retelling* of a Bond narrative in a new context, using an actor different than the one that originally appeared in the film. The game's ambiguous status as an adaptation and/or remake is indicative of the problematic continuity of the franchise as a whole. However, as this chapter will argue, *GoldenEye Wii* also makes various claims for its legitimacy as part of a wider lineage of Bond texts.

### Remaking *GoldenEye*: The Triangular Relationship

The decision to remake a "classic" film is often countered by fans of the original, arguing that a high-quality version of the text is already in existence. In an era of DVD and Blu-ray, a vast back catalog of film history is potentially as easily accessible to the consumer as the most recent cinematic releases. The continued availability of video games, however, is often more problematic. Even the most popular of console games have traditionally been reliant on the life span of their hardware. The Nintendo 64 console, and its library of games, was discontinued shortly after the release of its successor, the Nintendo GameCube in 2001. Those who still own a working system and game cartridge can continue to play *GoldenEye 64*, and copies can be obtained second-hand, but the title has been officially unavailable to purchase for more than a decade. Recently, services such as Nintendo's Virtual Console and Microsoft's Xbox Live Arcade have popularized the revival of old games as digital downloads. Although rumors have persisted that *GoldenEye 64* will appear on one of these platforms, the situation has been complicated by contractual issues: the game was published on a Nintendo system, but the developer, Rare, is now owned by Microsoft, which has its own console system, Xbox 360. Recent reports suggest that negotiations have been abandoned, since neither company is willing to grant the other the coup of re-releasing the prestigious title (Purchase).

As a result, many subsequent Bond games — not just Activision's remake — have arguably attempted to position themselves as replacements for the fondly remembered, but increasingly difficult to access, N64 title. The success of *GoldenEye 64* reinvigorated the James Bond property as a subject for video game production (much in the same way as the parent film re-established the



cinematic franchise), with Electronic Arts acquiring an exclusive ongoing license in 1999, and Activision taking control in 2008. Like *GoldenEye 64*, most of these games operate within the FPS genre and/or contain some form of multiplayer. As Kevin Impellizeri indicates, however, the legacy of *GoldenEye 64* has not always been beneficial: many reviews for later Bond games have explicitly referenced the Nintendo title, usually to indicate how the new product falters by comparison (14). Electronic Arts' FPS *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* (2004) received particularly strong criticism, since its supposedly "deceptive" name implied that it would be a sequel to, or a remake of, the N64 "classic" (Perry). In fact, the game has virtually nothing to do with the pre-existing *GoldenEye* brand apart from a brief appearance of the character Xenia Onatopp.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps most accurately summarized using Michael Druxman's concept of the "non-remake," described by Constantine Verevis (using film, but in this case, a game) as a process in which "a new [game] goes under the same [name] as a familiar property, but there is an entirely new plot" (7). The marketing ploy failed in this instance. *Rogue Agent* was one of the lowest-selling Bond games in history, highlighting the danger of evoking such a popular title while offering something completely different.

Perhaps in response to *Rogue Agent*'s seemingly baseless invocation of the *GoldenEye* franchise, publicity surrounding the *GoldenEye Wii* game has emphasized the title's direct, and respectful, relationship to an earlier referent. For instance, an interview with Eurocom, the game's developers, notes that "everyone took extreme care to ensure that this would be the most authentic *GoldenEye* experience possible" (Laughlin). The cover art also boldly states "GOLDENEYE IS BACK ... THE GOLDENEYE STORY COMES TO LIFE AGAIN." Such hyperbole does raise the question, however, of what exactly constitutes this "*GoldenEye* experience." Since different companies produced the two *GoldenEye* games (and renewed exploitation of the N64 title remains in limbo due to the aforementioned rights issues), *GoldenEye Wii* does not reproduce or derive itself from the earlier game's source code. Does this, then, make it more of a remake than an adaptation? Or, is it something else altogether? How might one describe the relationships between the film, the N64 game, and the Wii game?

As Thomas Leitch notes:

Remakes differ from other adaptations to a new medium and translations to a new language because of the triangular relationship they establish among themselves, the original film they remake, and the property on which both films are based. The nature of this triangle is most clearly indicated by the fact that the producers of a remake typically pay no adaptation fees to the makers of the original film, but rather purchase adaptation rights from the authors of the property on which that film was based, even though the remake is competing

much more directly with the original film than with the story or play or novel on which both of them are based [39].

In this instance, of course, the originating property is not a literary one, but rather the *GoldenEye* film, with the adaptation and the remake (seen as cinematic titles in Leitch's model) being the video games. Nonetheless, the Wii version clearly reflects Leitch's notion of an ambiguous "triangular relationship" (56). The Wii game's opening credit sequence, for instance, makes no mention of the N64 title, but does include explicit references to the movie franchise. The first credit is given to the cinematic production company, "Albert R. Broccoli's EON Productions Limited," reflecting that Activision's adaptation rights ultimately derive from this source. Indeed, the entire sequence is designed in a similar manner to the opening of a Bond movie, and even includes a remixed version of the hit song "GoldenEye." The game also touts the involvement of Bruce Feirstein (co-writer of the screenplay for the *GoldenEye* film), and David Arnold, whose musical compositions have been featured in every Bond movie since *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997). Therefore, in many instances, the Wii game asserts the legitimacy of its remake status by implying a direct continuity of authorship between itself and the original film. However, as Leitch's model suggests, the Wii remake is clearly "competing" with (and trading upon the success of) the N64 adaptation much more than the *GoldenEye* film. Although it is possible to claim that *GoldenEye Wii's* narrative is simply readapting the movie's screenplay, the game nonetheless appears to repeat a number of decisions that had already been "worked through" in adapting from the cinematic to the video game medium by the Nintendo 64 version. For example, the Wii game's full title — *GoldenEye 007* — is exactly the same as the N64's, rather than being simply *GoldenEye* like the film.

More significantly, both *GoldenEye 64* and *GoldenEye Wii* relay their single-player campaigns solely through the eyes of 007. The choice seems, in many ways, a straightforward one: the ability to *be* James Bond (or at least take control of his avatar) is undoubtedly appealing to many fans of the film series, and it creates continuity for the mission structure of the games.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, in order to integrate Bond into key sequences, the film's narrative has to be reworked at certain points. For instance, the destruction of the satellite control station in Severnaya, Russia, is experienced in the movie mostly through the character of Natalya Simonova. Coincidentally, Bond is observing the site through intermittent aerial surveillance footage at MI6 headquarters, but he is mostly absent from the screen during the sequence and has no control over the events as they transpire. By contrast, the *GoldenEye 64* version actually places 007 at the location during the station's attack, in the missions "Surface

(2)” and “Bunker (2),” and *GoldenEye Wii* echoes the shift in its levels “Outpost” and “Bunker.”<sup>5</sup> In both games, Bond meets Natalya in the control station, much earlier (and in a completely different location) than in the movie version. The point here, then, is not that the games have changed the film’s narrative, but that the Wii version has overtly made many of the *same* changes as the earlier N64 title.

*GoldenEye Wii* also includes additional mission objectives for players who choose more challenging difficulty levels. While this has become a standard in many games, it was one of the many innovations pioneered in *GoldenEye 64*. Furthermore, a number of the missions in the Wii game share the same titles as N64 levels (such as “Jungle,” and “Cradle”). Although the Wii game does not (and legally cannot) copy Rare’s level designs, certain stages nonetheless clearly allude to the earlier game. *GoldenEye 64*’s first level, “Dam,” for instance, gives Bond access to a sniper rifle at the top of a tower, allowing players to pick off enemy soldiers in the distance. This element is also in the Wii game’s first level, again entitled “Dam,” despite having no referent in the *GoldenEye* film. In both game titles, the only significant, and fully interactive, break from the regular FPS gameplay is the use of a tank (in the “Streets” [64] and “Tank” [Wii] levels respectively). Although this is a direct adaptation of Bond’s romp through St. Petersburg in the film, it is by no means the sole vehicle that Brosnan commandeers during the course of the movie. It has to be assumed that the specific prominence given to the tank in the Wii game is, at least in part, a reflection of its iconic use in the N64 game.

As noted above, *GoldenEye Wii* makes no official in-game pronouncement about its relationship to the N64 version (despite making a clear link to the film). The issue has, however, been raised in various extratextual sources. Interviews with the Wii game’s developer and publisher tend to involve the somewhat vague term “re-imagining” when discussing *GoldenEye 64* (Ronaghan; Laughlin; “Wii Goldeneye”). The implication appears to be that, while *GoldenEye Wii* clearly alludes to the earlier title, its various components are significantly altered (seemingly beyond a point which would require them to offer any compensation to Rare). Leitch might characterize the relationship as “updating”:

Updates are characterized by their overtly revisionary stance toward an original text they treat as classic, even though they transform it in some obvious way, usually by transposing it to a new setting, inverting its system of values, or adopting standards of realism that implicitly criticize the original as dated, out-moded, or irrelevant [47].

Although *GoldenEye 64* was revolutionary for its time, the game exists on dead technology (the N64 console), and some of its game mechanics and



visuals no longer reflect the standards of contemporary design. For instance, the N64's low-resolution graphical capabilities can make it difficult to identify and accurately take aim at enemies in the distance, even though they are often able to achieve perfect shots in response. The remake takes advantage of the comparatively more powerful hardware of the Nintendo Wii to offer elements such as extended cutscenes with voice acting, internet-based multiplayer, and improved graphics. The game also incorporates the more forgiving approach adopted by many recent FPS titles, such as an increased frequency of save checkpoints, and the ability for characters to regain health when not under direct fire. It also features the Wii's innovative motion control features, allowing players to aim directly at the screen as if the controller was a gun.

Some aspects of the update are perhaps not quite as predatory as in Leitch's model. Indeed, one could argue that the game is ultimately rather schizophrenic in its desire to both satisfy fans of *GoldenEye 64*, while also operating as a "modern" first-person shooter. Many of the title's control and gameplay settings default towards providing an updated experience, but these are not always mandatory. For instance, the game includes the option of a "007 Classic" mode, which restores the finite health bar of the N64 version. A more expensive "Collector's Edition" of the game was also released, containing a gold-colored version of Nintendo's Classic Controller Pro, allowing players to bypass the motion controls in favor of a gamepad which broadly emulates the Nintendo 64 control scheme. As such, gamers are given some degree of choice in constructing the extent of the update for themselves, potentially stripping away many of the new game mechanics in favor of an experience closer to the one offered by the original title. Crucially, however, this level of malleability is restricted largely to gameplay options. The game's choice of a central protagonist, and its effect upon the narrative, cannot be altered by the player.

### James Bond as Mobile Signifier: Brosnan vs. Craig

*GoldenEye 64* was the first Bond game produced on hardware that could approximate a photo-realistic effect in its rendering of playable avatars. It marked a relatively early instance of a video game developer acquiring the rights to use in-game likenesses of a film's stars: a trait that has subsequently become fairly commonplace for game tie-ins to blockbuster movie releases (and particularly in the ongoing series of Bond games).<sup>6</sup> Although *GoldenEye 64*'s characters now look somewhat blurry and misshapen by present-day standards, it is certainly possible to identify the Bond design as being modeled on Pierce Brosnan, Valentin on Robbie Coltrane, Trevelyan on Sean Bean,



and so on. Every level of *GoldenEye 64* begins with a third-person camera swooping around Brosnan's virtual body, before dissolving into the back of his head to create the regular first-person viewpoint. The game explicitly indicates that the player is seeing through the eyes of not only James Bond's avatar but, crucially, Bond as portrayed by Pierce Brosnan.

The use of a digital version of Daniel Craig in place of Brosnan is undoubtedly the Wii game's most explicit act of updating. As the current Bond film star, Craig was already under contract with Activision at the time of the remake's production, and has provided his image and undertaken voice work for the company's other Bond-related games. Re-acquiring Brosnan's services would have likely required significant negotiation and expense, although this is not to suggest that Craig's inclusion is simply a matter of convenience. Activision's Graham Hagmaier notes that the suggestion to use Craig came from the producers of the Bond film series, rather than originating with the game designers, indicating a desire to increase synergy between the current cinematic franchise and the games (Concepcion). Nonetheless, the use of Craig has significant repercussions upon the intertextual relationships between various Bond-related sources, complicating notions of a mere "triangular relationship" in the *GoldenEye* remake process.

In their groundbreaking study of James Bond, Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott emphasize the character's "malleability" and his status as a "popular hero ... a cultural phenomenon of a quite specific type with quite specific — and complex — conditions of existence" (13, 19). They suggest that the character's longevity and presence in a variety of different media has created significant contradictions for scholars attempting to conceive of James Bond as a singular, cohesive entity (19). Even if one discounts 007's literary heritage and the "unofficial" (non-EON) films, the James Bond movie franchise is still extremely ambiguous in terms of its links between texts.<sup>7</sup> Chapman summarizes the series as operating a precarious system of "continuity and change" with each new installment: reaffirming the accumulated legacy of the James Bond character, while simultaneously updating the formula to meet the demands of its contemporary audience (196). The casting of a new actor as Bond is particularly disruptive — and potentially destabilizing to the franchise if viewers disapprove of the replacement. Broadly speaking, each actor is considered to have pushed the series in a different direction: the Roger Moore films, for instance, are often characterized as having a greater emphasis on comedy, while his direct successor Timothy Dalton portrayed a somewhat darker, colder 007. Nonetheless, viewers are generally invited to read the series as part of an ongoing collection of adventures. As Lance Parkin notes:

George Lazenby's Bond saw his wife killed by Blofeld [in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969)], Sean Connery's Bond [returning for one more "official" film in

*Diamonds Are Forever* (1971)] avenged her death, Roger Moore's Bond visited her grave [in *For Your Eyes Only* (1981)], and the loss was mentioned by a friend of Timothy Dalton's Bond [in *Licence to Kill* (1989)] [16].

Each film appears to be set roughly in the period of its original release and yet Bond does not age chronologically over time. Unlike, for instance, The Doctor of *Doctor Who*, whose powers of regeneration explain the character's longevity and altered appearance, the Bond films offer no real diegetic justification for Bond's seemingly eternal youth. By the release of *GoldenEye*, produced over thirty years after Connery's first Bond film, establishing a coherent history for the character is problematic. Bond mentions that he "used to drop in [to Russia] occasionally. Shoot in and out": a tongue-in-cheek reference to many of the Cold War-based plots of past films, implying that Brosnan's 007 is the same character who experienced these earlier missions. Yet this representation of Bond, speaking in the 1990s, would have been too young to engage in conflicts rooted in the sixties and seventies.

Following the fairly widespread critical backlash towards the excesses of Brosnan's final outing — *Die Another Day* (2002) — a decision was made to finally "reboot," rather than merely continue, the James Bond franchise (Chapman 238–242). *Casino Royale* (2006), Craig's debut film, marked the last of Ian Fleming's full-length Bond novels to receive an official film adaptation. (It was, conversely, the first Bond narrative Fleming ever wrote.) The film operates as an origin story for the character, showing him as a junior agent who has just earned his double-0 status. As it is set explicitly in the twenty-first century, *Casino Royale* openly challenges, and distances itself from, the complicated timeline of previous installments.<sup>8</sup> The decision to feature Daniel Craig in an updated version of *GoldenEye* is perhaps more justifiable than with any previous Bond actors, since his incarnation of the character establishes a new back-story, rather than attempting to fit (however unsteadily) within a pre-existing framework. Craig's 007, in theory, brings none of the baggage of previous Bonds: in his narrative universe, the events of *GoldenEye* — or, for that matter, *From Russia with Love*, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, or any of the other cinematic storylines — are not part of the character's past.

As the game fits into the chronology of Daniel Craig's Bond films, the political focus underpinning the narrative is significantly altered. In the original movie version of *GoldenEye*, the main villain — the defected 00-agent Alec Trevelyan — is seeking revenge for the British government's treatment of his parents (who were Lienz Cossacks) at the end of the Second World War. Having moved the action into the twenty-first century, the game is required to develop a new motivation for the character. *GoldenEye Wii* sees Trevelyan disenfranchised with the banking system, suggesting that financial greed had corrupted national policy (and the values that he and Bond had fought for as

government agents). In both instances, his ultimate plan is essentially the same: to steal from the Bank of England, thus destroying the global economy, and to use the *GoldenEye* satellite to disguise the theft. However, the varying intent behind the scheme reflects the differences in global outlook at the time of both texts' release. Furthermore, the original film set much of its action in Russia, utilizing the then-recent fall of the Soviet Union as a backdrop. The Wii game retains a number of these settings, but no longer dwells upon the legacy of the Cold War. In some cases, however, the locations of levels have been altered in potentially evocative ways. The theft of the electromagnetic pulse helicopter in the film occurs in Monte Carlo; in the Wii game's "Carrier" level, however, the action occurs as part of an arms fair in Dubai, reflecting the increased prominence of the Middle East in recent political conflict and debate. The shifted focus of the Wii title thus aims to fit in with the contemporary, post 9/11 narratives of *Casino Royale* and *Quantum of Solace* (2008), rather than evoke the historical specificity of the original text.

Furthermore, the representation of Bond in the *GoldenEye* Wii game is filtered through Craig's performance in his two cinematic outings as 007, at times noticeably reacting against earlier embodiments of the character. For instance, Martin Willis characterizes Pierce Brosnan's interpretation of Bond as "technological rather than physical," possessing an immediate mastery of high-tech appliances developed by Q (169, 171). The film version of *GoldenEye* contains a large number of gadgets. Many of these also feature in the N64 game, including Bond's spy camera and multi-purpose watch, as well as additional items designed to extend the mission objectives, such as data disk analyzers, and electronic key pass copiers. There are numerous instances in the game where players can only succeed by exploring Bond's inventory and deploying the correct gadget at the appropriate moment. Escape from a prison cell in the level "Archives," for example, is only possible by activating a magnet on Bond's watch, causing the metal door key to be stolen from a nearby guard. The N64 adaptation of *GoldenEye* thus claims to reproduce and extend the film's version of Bond as being at once reliant upon technology, but also uniquely capable of utilizing it in skillful and ingenious ways.

Reversing Brosnan's interpretation, Craig's Bond relies much less on outlandish gadgets. Both of Craig's films clearly update their technology to reflect the contemporary setting — the walls of MI6 in particular are covered in touch screens continually streaming new data.<sup>9</sup> The most prevalent item used by Bond himself is a smartphone — a distinctively twenty-first century technology — but, even with its souped-up MI6 software, its usage does not significantly exceed the functionality available to the average consumer (particularly in an era when there is an App for almost everything). Although there remains a somewhat cynical commercial imperative for giving prominence to real-world



technology (the Sony-branded phone used by the character in *Casino Royale* was available to purchase at the time of the film's release), it nonetheless serves to humanize Bond and place him in a more realistic setting. Craig's version of 007 possesses cutting-edge technology, without overtly straying into the fantastic (as Brosnan's outings occasionally did, such as the "invisible" car of *Die Another Day*). Reflecting this changed approach, the smartphone in the Wii version of *GoldenEye* essentially replaces the watch of the N64 game, minus the hidden add-ons, such as the magnet and laser. Players instead primarily use the phone to perform such tasks as hacking into security systems, taking covert photos, and analyzing data. For instance, a newly-created level in the Wii title ("Nightclub") sees Bond using facial recognition software on the device to locate a contact, Sergeant Garcia, amongst a group of revellers.<sup>10</sup>

Craig's version of 007 in the films is also presented as being headstrong and reckless in his physicality. While chasing a parkour-trained assailant in *Casino Royale*, for instance, Bond clearly does not possess the same skills as his foe, but he simply pushes forward with sheer brute force. Numerous shots in this sequence draw attention to the grace of the villain's moves compared to the relative unsteadiness of Bond's jumps. This attribute, again, is factored into the Wii game. Whereas Brosnan's Bond bungee jumps from the dam at the beginning of the *GoldenEye* film, executing a precise maneuver with a mountaineering pistol to prevent the rope from recoiling, the Wii game sees Craig's incarnation intending to parachute down. Finding himself surrounded by guards, he instead opens the chute to envelop his foes, making the split-second decision to jump from the dam unaided. The cutscene that follows — interspersed with the game's title sequence — shows Bond careening dangerously down one of the outflows from the dam's wall, eventually splashing into the collected water at the bottom. As Monika Gehlawat suggests, this interpretation "stresses improvisation over forms of technological and social mastery" (132). It is clearly a counter to Willis' earlier summation of Brosnan's Bond.

## James Bond and the First-Person Shooter: The Limitations of Genre

In most sections of the game that emphasize Daniel Craig's star status (and Brosnan's in the earlier title), the player has little to no control over 007 (i.e., the cutscene described above). Whether the fully interactive parts of the game can truly re-create the experience of a Bond film, starring either actor, remains open to debate. In the main FPS sections, the player can do things that the cinematic James Bond would seemingly never do, such as purposely



murdering an innocent bystander, or even getting killed himself. In these extreme examples, gameplay ceases and the player loses the level, implying that the player has failed to correctly embody 007. One can, however, spend minutes running in circles on the spot, or traverse most of the level in an exaggerated and unnecessary crouching position. If the objectives of the mission are ultimately met, then the narrative continues as normal — initiating another non-interactive cut-scene showing Brosnan or Craig looking suave, with no indication of the bizarre behavior that the player (as Bond) exhibited during the level itself.

As stated, both the N64 and Wii adaptations of *GoldenEye* operate almost exclusively within the parameters of the First-Person Shooter, and this choice of genre also has significant repercussions upon the gameplay, narrative, and ultimately characterization of Bond. Given 007's iconic association with firearms (particularly his trusty Walther PPK) in his cinematic and literary incarnations, the use of James Bond in a game based primarily around shooting is, arguably, valid but potentially limiting. Abe Stein and Matthew Weise state:

The Bond of the films and novels is, of course, a soldier as well as a playboy, a detective, and a secret agent. But in the games he tends to be only the former. A Bond film or novel that involves no other aspect of the character would no doubt be seen as wanting by audiences [36].

In keeping with the traditional demands of the FPS, both *GoldenEye* games' levels are designed so that Bond encounters a significant number of low-level henchmen who must be successfully overpowered in order to progress. While there are undoubtedly many moments of gunplay in the *GoldenEye* film — such as Bond's escape from the military archives in St. Petersburg — 007's license to kill is still used more selectively in the cinematic version (or indeed any other Bond movie starring Brosnan or Craig) than in either of the games.<sup>11</sup>

As Derek A. Burrill notes in relation to the N64 game, the gameplay "is tailored according to the design of the graphics engine" (185). For the most part, other elements of the film's version of Bond that feature within the game's narrative are ones that could be successfully integrated into this first-person viewpoint. Thus, players of *GoldenEye 64* can place explosives in the Soviet weapons facility, and escape from the train using a laser hidden in Bond's watch, since these are essentially variants of the kind of aiming, throwing, and shooting that recur throughout the title. Apart from the aforementioned tank level, players cannot, however, take control of any vehicles seen in the film, for instance Bond's car race against Xenia Onatopp. Such a sequence would have required extensive additions to the graphics engine, running the risk of being viewed as "tacked on" and inferior to the game's main FPS sequences. The Wii version does occasionally circumvent the limitations

of the FPS game engine, but only by incorporating limited interactivity Quick Time Events (QTEs), such as during Bond's final showdown with Trevelyan at the end of the game. In this instance, parts of the level take the form of choreographed fights, incorporating elaborate camera movements and special moves not available to the player during regular gameplay. These moments are essentially cutscenes, with the player's input restricted to simply pressing an appropriate button or making a gesture with the Wii controller when prompted on-screen. If the player performs these correctly, the scene continues to play out successfully; if not, Bond dies. The QTE remains a controversial element of game design. On the one hand, these moments offer an almost-cinematic level of spectacle, and allow some (minor) participation in narrative sequences that are varied from the usual run-and-shoot model of the game; on the other, the player is forced to concede control of Bond.

*Goldeneye Wii* ultimately appears to move back and forth between defining itself by, and then partly distancing itself from, the cinematic Bond. The presentation draws heavily upon the movie franchise's iconography — the aforementioned title sequence, the virtual presence of the actors, the action scenes, and so on — and yet the narrative alters the earlier film version, and the gameplay accentuates certain elements of the 007 formula at the expense of others, offering the player the opportunity to act in an entirely un-Bond-like manner if they so wish. However, as Henry Jenkins notes, fidelity may not necessarily be the issue:

Increasingly, we inhabit a world of transmedia storytelling.... We already know the story before we even buy the game and would be frustrated if all it offered us was a regurgitation of the original film experience. Rather, [games exist] in dialogue with the films, conveying new narrative experiences through [their] creative manipulation of environmental details ["Game Design" 124].

In this regard, the *GoldenEye Wii* remake offers a valuable meta-commentary on the James Bond series as a whole. Its mixture of old and new is, in many ways, a major element of the franchise's longevity. Instead of viewing *GoldenEye Wii* as a simplistic update of a single film and/or N64 game, then, one must consider it another puzzle piece in a much broader effort to comprehend the ever-elusive 007. Leitch's notion of a triangular relationship is useful to a point, but fails to take into account the vast range of cross-media intertexts with which the title interacts. At the time of writing, Activision has just announced plans to publish a new console game entitled *007 Legends* (2012), which will link together narratives from six different EON Bond films, including the most-recent addition *Skyfall* (2012). It has not yet been announced whether Daniel Craig will again be cast as the playable avatar throughout the game, or if the likenesses of earlier Bond actors will be used for the relevant

stages. In either case, one can chart an increasing complexity in the relationship between the video game and film franchises, with both forms influencing each other in different ways. Having experimented with the character's back-story in *GoldenEye Wii*, is it possible that the cinematic Bond could also eventually "re-live" existing adventures, such as the events of *Goldfinger* (1964) (a notion that is certainly credible, given the rebooted continuity in Daniel Craig's films)? Texts such as *GoldenEye Wii* thus have the potential to enrich our consumption of the Bond experience as both gamers and moviegoers, offering reflections on the past and opportunities for 007's future.

### NOTES

1. With love and thanks to Laura Cockman, who bravely joined me in watching every Bond film (and who makes a very good vodka martini).

2. To avoid confusion between the two texts, subsequent references to the Nintendo 64 edition will utilize its unofficial, but widely used, alternate title *GoldenEye 64*. The new version will be referred to as *GoldenEye Wii*. The reference to the games in relation to their parent consoles reflects that, at the time of release, both were "system exclusives" and built to take advantage of the particular specifications of the hardware. Following the completion of this chapter, Activision released *GoldenEye 007: Reloaded* (2011) for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 consoles, breaking the original Wii-exclusive status of the title. The main game's storyline and levels are identical to the Wii version, with the only significant change being the upgrade to high-definition graphics (and the addition of some non-narrative single-player missions).

3. Controlling the title's "rogue agent," the player encounters and kills many of the same villains that 007 defeats in other films, such as Dr. No and Auric Goldfinger. By denying Bond's presence in these events, *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* explicitly contradicts the entire cinematic franchise, almost to the point of parody. Although, as Henry Jenkins indicates, such a radical interpretation of an existing set of texts frequently occurs in fan-fiction, it is still relatively rare in officially-licensed texts (*Convergence Culture* 158–160). The game does, to some extent, precede *GoldenEye Wii*'s "retelling" of the existing James Bond narrative universe, but its irreverent approach to the source material appears to have confused (and even angered) some fans.

4. As Kingsley Amis suggests, "we don't want to have dinner or go golfing with or talk to Bond. We want to be Bond" (quoted in Bennett and Woollacott 16). The back cover for the N64 game makes its promise to realize this fantasy unequivocally clear: "You are Bond. James Bond."

5. The N64 game does actually have Bond also scope out the area as part of an earlier, preliminary mission in the levels "Surface (1)" and "Bunker (1)." This is not shown in the film and not replicated in the Wii game.

6. Earlier titles had sometimes featured a photograph of the appropriate Bond star as the game's cover art, or in promotional advertisements. However, 007's representation as a controllable on-screen character tended to amount to little more than a generic (and usually very blocky) white male, reflecting the hardware limitations of earlier computers and games consoles (Hall 313–318).

7. Only the Bond films created by EON Productions are generally considered "official" and canonical by fans. Fleming sold the screen rights to *Casino Royale* before the main film franchise was established, and these were only finally acquired by EON in the late 1990s, allowing for the production of the Daniel Craig film. The first screen adaptation

of the novel was featured in the anthology television series *Climax!* (1954), with 007 rewritten as an American ("Jimmy" Bond). A second adaptation, a feature-film (1967), was a comedic spoof released during the height of the Connery Bond craze. Furthermore, a copyright issue relating to Fleming's novel *Thunderball* gave producer Kevin McClory the option to make his own cinematic version, released as *Never Say Never Again* (1983) with Sean Connery returning as an older, and somewhat obsolete 007. These unofficial texts are nonetheless revealing in their alternate visions of how the Bond franchise could have been represented on screen.

8. There are, nonetheless, some elements of continuity: Judi Dench, for instance, reprises her role as M (although, like Bond, the character's history seems to have been rebooted), and the film is still officially known as the twenty-first entry in the EON Bond cinematic canon (rather than the first of a new series).

9. The design of MI6's data screens, seen in the *Quantum of Solace* film, is adapted for the menu and mission briefing sequences of the *GoldenEye Wii* game. (*GoldenEye 64*, by contrast, presents this information on-screen as hard copy document files).

10. In the *GoldenEye* film, Bond gathers biographical information on Xenia Onnatopp using a special telescope, which sends the images to be analyzed by MI6 and returned via a printout in his car. However, the sequence in the game has more in common with the *Quantum of Solace* film, where Bond identifies various members of the Quantum organization by taking photographs on his phone.

11. The N64 game did introduce a number of stealth elements uncommon to the FPS genre of the time, in an attempt to simulate the covert nature of Bond's profession. This mechanic is also present in the Wii remake. In both titles, dispatching enemies noisily could attract an onslaught of additional foes, and shooting carelessly could accidentally destroy equipment or kill characters necessary to complete mission objectives. Nonetheless, the Bond games still place greater emphasis on combat than the films. The opening sequence of the *GoldenEye* movie, for instance, sees 007 undertaking significant effort to enter the chemical weapons factory undetected; the opening levels of the games (entitled "Dam" and "Facility" in both versions), however, require the player to subdue several dozen anonymous soldiers in order to succeed.



## CHAPTER 9

# Zombie Stripper Geishas in the New Global Economy: Racism and Sexism in Video Game Content

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STEWART CHANG

Although mainstream media in America might, arguably, be less tolerant of prejudice and bigotry than ever before, racism and sexism persists in much of American popular consumption, sometimes patently, but more often less directly. Outright, unmediated racism and/or sexism still appears both quite often and simultaneously, intersecting in curious and complex ways. In her analysis of representations of women of color in music (particularly, rap music), film (*Colors* and *Year of the Dragon*), and video games (*Custer's Revenge*), scholar Kimberle Crenshaw illustrates how media combines racism and sexism to silence and subordinate women of color (117). Crenshaw and her co-editors advocate for regulation of such offensive media, using an interpretation of the First Amendment of the American Constitution to claim that permitting offensive forms of expression allows for one group to silence another. Nonetheless, recent case law on the topic, particularly pertaining to video game content, demonstrates that the American legal system will not repress even the most patently offensive types of expression. While troubling, I would contend that patent racism and sexism in movies and video games are less invidious and detrimental than facially neutral material that nevertheless perpetuates harmful racial and gender stereotypes within the mainstream consumer consciousness.

Whereas racism and sexism in mainstream movies have sometimes

become more difficult to isolate, video games remain a forum for both conscious and unconscious racism that produces what Neil Gotanda has identified as racial pleasure, where the player experiences pleasure in the consumption of racialized images in a manner that is akin to sexualized pleasure ("Computer Games"). I would more narrowly propose that consumption of video games localized from Japan, where representations of race and gender evolved on a much different trajectory than in the United States, reveals deeply embedded unconscious racial and sexual stereotypes held by consumers in America, specifically as they pertain to perceptions and attitudes relating to Asian women. Yet the very fact that these video games are localized from Japanese originals paradoxically allows American consumers to derive racial and misogynistic pleasure even while simultaneously disavowing those same elements as foreign and "Other."

### No Durians Allowed: Localization, Cultural Odorlessness, and Misperceived Specters of Racism

As Roland Kelts aptly expresses in the title of his book, Japanese popular culture has indeed invaded America. Japanese anime, manga, pop music, television dramas, and video games now hold a significant place in American popular culture consumer consciousness. Anne Allison observes the influence especially of Japanese youth culture, which she labels as "J-cool," so that now "interest is paid [by Japanese consumer product producers] both to the capital generated by the youth market and to capitalizing on that market to extend the attraction Japanese youth goods have for global consumers" ("Cool Brand" 90).

The popularity of J-cool products has created not only a market for export to North America and Europe, but also a demand for localization, which involves altering or modifying the product with Western consumption in mind. Keiran Dunne summarizes localization as involving:

- (a) translation of textual content into the language and textual convention of the target locale; and (b) adaptation of non-textual content (from colors, icons and bitmaps, to packaging, form factors, etc.) as well as input, output and delivery mechanisms to take into account the cultural, technical and regulatory requirements of that locale. In sum, localization is not so much about specific *tasks* as much as it is about the *processes* by which products are adapted [Dunne 4].

Although accuracy of translation is an integral aspect of localization, as illustrated by the notoriously lampooned "All your base are belong to us" in the English version of the Japanese video game *Zero Wing*, adaptations that take into account the nuances in culture are equally important. As Linda Hutcheon

explains, adaptation is “both a product and a process of creation and reception” that must take into account different economic, political, and cultural forces that affect both the producer and the consumer (Hutcheon xiv).

Analyzing the consumption of Japanese video games such as *Pokémon* in America, Allison observes that, “while the popularity of the product generated positive associations with Japan, few expressed deep understanding or attraction for the country itself” (“Cool Brand” 96). Koichi Iwabuchi similarly finds that “consumers of and audiences for Japanese animation and games, it can be argued, may be aware of the Japanese origin of these commodities, but those texts barely feature ‘Japanese bodily odor’ identified as such” (Iwabuchi 28). Iwabuchi identifies this “cultural odorlessness” as a factor that helps Japanese products become more attractive to foreign consumers (27). Sega’s *Ryu ga Gotoku 3*, known in Europe and North America as *Yakuza 3*, is a prime example of creating cultural odorlessness in the localization process. Sega strategically decided to exclude content culturally specific to Japan, such as hostess clubs and mahjong parlors, from its Western releases of *Yakuza 3* because the company believed that Western audiences unfamiliar with the culture would not understand or appreciate the content. For example, Sega’s censorship of the game’s hostess clubs — establishments where Japanese businessmen go after work to be catered to by female hostesses who service the men by joining them for drinks and attentive conversation (Allison, *Nightwork* 7–10) — suggests concern over exposing such a potentially sexist and misogynistic facet of Japanese nightlife before a global audience. In removing the content, Sega adapts the game to remove the “odor” of any cultural phenomena that might be misinterpreted as misogynistic and thus offensive.

Localization and adaptation can also reveal the specific cultural sensitivities and prejudices of the consumer audience rather than the producer. Prior to its release in the United States, Capcom’s *Biohazard 5*, or *Resident Evil 5*, garnered media attention for potentially racist overtones in having a player control a white male character who targets and shoots down zombies who are universally black. The racial controversy, however, did not gain much traction and the game eventually became a bestseller in the United States. In his assessment of any potential racism, *New York Times* critic Seth Schiesel reads the game as racially neutral, saying “when you are in control of the action, the racial or ethnic appearance of your enemies stops mattering.” Yet, Schiesel concedes:

All that said, *Resident Evil 5* could not possibly have been made in the United States. Racial sensitivities and prevailing political correctness would have had American game executives squirming in their Aeron chairs the minute they read a budget proposal for a game featuring African zombies. Not so in Japan,

apparently. The Japanese development team at Capcom, which developed *Resident Evil*, professed surprise at the racism concerns when black game writers in the United States started criticizing the game based on preview videos more than a year ago.

Virtual killing and maiming of digitized representations of Africans would not carry the same racial overtones in Japan as they would in the United States since Japan does not possess a similar history of institutionalized racism and violence against people of African descent. *Resident Evil 5* is racially neutral as a product from Japan, and as such, does not have the same cultural “odor” as it would in the United States. Rather, the short controversy surrounding its release demonstrates the continuing anxieties over race in the United States.

Similarly, when the French film *Intouchables* (2011) was initially released in France, *Variety* film critic Jay Weissberg immediately lambasted it as “fling[ing] about the kind of Uncle Tom racism one hopes has permanently exited American screens.” The film is about the developing friendship between Philippe, a wealthy white quadriplegic, and his live-in valet Driss, a black ex-con from the projects. In Weissberg’s analysis, “Driss is treated as nothing but a performing monkey (with all the racist associations of such a term) ... in a role barely removed from the jolly house slave of yore, entertaining the master while embodying all the usual stereotypes about class and race.” Since then, the film has become a cultural phenomenon, embraced enthusiastically by audiences in France and across Europe, and is now the highest grossing non-Anglophone film in history (Rabier). As success of the film grew, the French mainstream media immediately came to its defense, citing Weissberg’s reaction as demonstrative of the obsession with political correctness in the United States. As in the case of *Resident Evil 5*, the criticism of the film reveals more about race relations in the United States than it does about race in the country where the film originates.

## The Racial Politics of Black Knights: Fantasy and Science Fiction as Sites of Permissive Racial Pleasure

*Yakuza 3* and *Resident Evil 5* are localized games that are or have been adjusted so that they are inoffensive to American standards of racism and/or sexism. Nevertheless, video games as a medium remain a relatively safe harbor for patent racism and sexism when compared to movies, where the atmosphere of respect for and tolerance of difference has penetrated more deeply. Movie producers today appear to be more sensitive to and conscientious about racialization processes and ideologies, and to a lesser degree ones of gender, than in the time of Mickey Rooney’s infamous yellowface portrayal of the Japanese



neighbor Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* or the films mentioned by Crenshaw. Political correctness, however, does not seem to be as strong of a factor for video game producers or consumers. For example, one of the most successful franchises in the last couple decades, Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series, has repeatedly been taken to task for its problematic use of racial and sexual stereotypes, particularly in its representations of minority and immigrant characters. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* incited protest from the Haitian community for including a mission where the objective is to "kill all the Haitians" (Thorsen). The next game in the series, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, proved even more controversial, not only receiving criticism for its stereotypical portrayals of African Americans, Asians, and Latinos<sup>1</sup> but also gaining particular notoriety and legal scrutiny for its hidden sexual content.<sup>2</sup> The eventual results of the legal firestorm spurred by the "Hot Coffee" controversy, as the hidden sexual content was called, demonstrates the limits of state regulation on violent and sexual content in video games. The "Hot Coffee" matter reignited the larger debate, already fueled by the perceived role of video games in school shootings, about stricter regulation and censorship in video games. In the end, the Courts have generally classified non-obscene content in video games as a protected form of expression under the First Amendment,<sup>3</sup> though many scholars have continued to document the deleterious effects of videogames on children and society at large (Kenyota 785). Judge Robert Lasnik, despite upholding First Amendment protections over video games, noted in his decision that some video games indeed "promote hateful stereotypes and portray levels of violence and degradation that are repulsive."

In developing his thesis of racial pleasure, Neil Gotanda states that he is not as interested in realistic racial representations such as *Grand Theft Auto* where stereotyping and racialization is clearer, but he instead looks to fantasy games that employ races such as elves, dwarves, and goblins, where structures and ideologies of racialization are less obvious ("Computer Games" 930). Gotanda argues that these representations nevertheless give racial cues. He notes, for example, "various body-types may be dark and menacing, but are not so easily seen as racial stereotypes. Given these less closely related visual cues, fantasy figures are not susceptible to a simple representational analysis" (N. Gotanda, "Computer Games" 930). Gotanda further argues that the medium of fantasy allows players to participate in racialization that appears completely inoffensive, but nevertheless produces the same pleasure as patently offensive and even illegal forms of racism such as workplace discrimination, hate speech, and hate crimes that are publicly disavowed in mainstream American society (N. Gotanda, "Beyond Supreme Court Anti-Discrimination").

It is likely that racial pleasure also depends on the underlying awareness

and subconscious predispositions that consumers already hold concerning race, as well as gender, since the two often intersect. Gotanda's phenomenon of racial pleasure is also present in film, quite notably in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, where racist stereotypes are readily identifiable but guised in the form of alien races or robots within the science fiction genre. Though the two movies generated significant scrutiny by viewers for these thinly-veiled racist stereotypes, they both nevertheless garnered enormous success in the box office. In her analysis of *Phantom Menace*, Patricia Williams assesses Jar Jar Binks as "a black man in frog face. Nothing wrong with that, says Lucasfilm; this is science fiction." Williams goes on to describe the ways in which "*The Phantom Menace* is filled with the hierarchies of accent and class status" in a racially stereotyped fashion (n.p.). She notes how the junk-dealer Watto "speaks in a gravelly Middle Eastern accent" and "bears a striking similarity to a caricature of a Jewish journalist ... the cartoon shows a large-nosed, round-bellied man with spindly arms, bandy little legs and flat feet.... Wings sprout from his shoulders, and on his left hand he carries a scroll that says, 'anything for money.'" Similarly, Williams observes how the Neimoidians of the Trade Federation, the primary antagonists of the film, are presented as "status-obsessed" and "known for their exceptional organizing abilities," but also "speak like Charlie Chan." Almost a decade later, *Revenge of the Fallen* renewed attention to racial stereotyping with the characters Mudflap and Skidz, twin robots who speak in racially-coded street slang and admit over the course of the movie that they are illiterate. When questioned about the possible offensiveness of the characters, director Michael Bay defended his film in the same manner as George Lucas, saying "It's done in fun ... I don't know if it's stereotypes — [*sic*] they are robots, by the way" (Cohen).

In her assessment of Mudflap and Skidz, however, cinema and media studies scholar Allyson Nadia Field remarks, "there's a persistent dehumanization of African Americans throughout Hollywood that displaces issues of race onto non-human entities.... It's not about skin color or robot color. It's about how their actions and language are coded racially" (quoted in Cohen). The characters in the films are effective precisely because they play to the subconscious racist assumptions audience members already hold. The intended audience response to these characters, whether humor or loathing, largely depends on ability of the audience to read the racial codes alluded to. Yet the potential racism can also be deflected by the medium, not only by the directors of the films who justify the depictions by saying that it is only science fiction and thus "good clean fun," but also potentially by audience members who may subconsciously take pleasure in consuming racist stereotypes while consciously disaffecting them as unreal fantasy.

In this respect, I would differentiate video games that produce racial pleasure, as well as misogynistic pleasure, from patently offensive games. *Custer's Revenge* is an adult title specifically marketed to an audience that is likely to be conscious of the misogynistic and racist nature of the game. Even offensive games intended for more mainstream consumption likely remain conscious in their use of offensive stereotyping. David Leonard notes how in *Outlaw Volleyball*, "all the female participants wear the skimpiest possible G-string bathing suits that leave little to the imagination; all the characters have large, exposed breasts, regardless of race. Yet the gameplays on the fetish and exotification of women of color through both its narrative and image making" (Leonard, "Not a Hater" 85). These portrayals are arguably intended to be "over the top," similar to the *Duke Nukem* line of games in their brazen misogyny and racial exotification. In playing *Duke Nukem Forever* or *Outlaw Volleyball*, players are also likely to be self-aware of their participation in misogynistic and culturally insensitive representations.

The same system of racial pleasure present in the consumption of fantasy and science fiction games is perhaps more surreptitious in the consumption of games localized from Japan, which further holds the potential to allow for permissive gender stereotyping. Unlike *Duke Nukem* and *Outlaw Volleyball*, American players are allowed to deflect offensive racist and sexist material as products of an "Other" Japanese culture, and therefore foreign from their own views. The newest installment of *Yakuza* illustrates the dual layering of racial pleasure not only through fantasy but also through cultural "Othering." Imagine a video game where the player controls a man wearing an American flag shirt wielding a Gatling gun as he mows down hordes of residents in a virtual rendering of the red light district of Tokyo. He interrupts his carnage and enters an establishment where he hires a Japanese girl named Kotomi, restrained by leather handcuffs, to light his cigarettes, pour drinks for him, and flirt with him. Described this way, the game could be interpreted as being patently racist and sexist. However, adding the detail that all the residents of the virtual Tokyo, including Kotomi, are zombies<sup>4</sup> seems to remove at least one layer of self-conscious offensiveness for players. Adding the further detail that this video game is localized from Japan, I suggest, removes yet another layer of self-conscious offensiveness among American consumers. The scenario described above comes from *Ryu ga Gotoku: OF THE END*, localized in the West as *Yakuza: Dead Souls*.

Expanding upon Gotanda's thesis of racial pleasure and extending it beyond fantasy, science fiction, and zombie games, localized Japanese video games also allow for racial pleasure and misogynistic pleasure because of their foreign status. For example, *Sengoku Musou*, localized as *Samurai Warriors*, allows a player to choose from several heroes from the Sengoku era of Japanese



history in a game that pits the lone warrior chosen by the player against hordes of enemy soldiers that also happen to all be identical character models. The unlockable alternate costume for one of these characters, Sakai Magoichi, has him dressed as “Johnny Rambo.” Although racially neutral for Japanese consumers, Magoichi’s bonus costume dons some cultural meaning when consumed in America. Asian American scholars have criticized the Rambo films as capitalizing on stereotypes of Asians, perpetuating not only the visual essentialist notion that all Asians look the same, but also the perception of Asians as dehumanized enemies and invaders.<sup>5</sup> Like *Resident Evil 5*, *Samurai Warriors* is completely racially neutral in its original intent, but can allow for racial pleasure when consumed in the United States as a player controls a character dressed as Rambo, a popularized symbol of American masculinity, killing enemies whose costuming remains the same and are therefore identifiably Asian. Any specter of conscious racism intended by the game developer is dissipated by the fact that *Samurai Warriors* is a Japanese product and the bonus Rambo costume is an ancillary part of the gameplay, though it nevertheless potentially allows the American consumer to partake in unexpected racial pleasure.

### Busted: Fanservice, Misogyny and What Is Lost in Translation

*Samurai Warriors* is a spinoff of *Shin Sangokumusou*, known as *Dynasty Warriors* in Western markets. The evolution of the franchise employs representations particular to Japanese culture that become a forum for not only permissible racial pleasure but also for, when localized in the United States, permissible misogynistic pleasure. The *Warriors* line of games is the flagship franchise for Japanese video game developer Koei, previously known primarily for their historic simulations set in Asia. The first *Shin Sangokumusou*, or *Dynasty Warriors 2*, is a tactical action game that was marketed as a launch title to showcase the processing capabilities of the PlayStation 2 by rendering dozens of enemies on the screen at the same time for the player to battle against. In the game, the player chooses one of several famous generals from the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and controls that character who then engages hundreds of enemy soldiers across various stages. The gameplay focuses on a central theme from the literary source, where the prominent characters are each described as one warrior worth a thousand. *Dynasty Warriors 2* proved to be a surprise hit for Koei, particularly in the overseas market. The success inspired a sequel, *Shin Sangokumusou 2*, or *Dynasty Warriors 3*, which became an even greater success and the first Koei title to sell over one million copies. The success of the game would subsequently lead to further



sequels of the franchise, eventual porting to other game systems, spinoffs like *Samurai Warriors* and *Warriors Orochi*, and several adaptations of popular anime such as *Gundam*, *Fist of the North Star*, and *One Piece*. Although sales for the franchise in North America and Europe, compared to sales in Asia, represent only a small fraction of its success, the franchise has nevertheless remained a consistent candidate for localization by Koei.

A significant departure in the *Dynasty Warriors* series from the literary source, which is set in an era where women were generally excluded from the battlefield, is the increasing (with each games in the series) presence of playable female characters. Sun Shang Xiang and Diao Chan are the only playable female characters in *Dynasty Warriors 2*, but in the most recent version, *Shin Sangoku Musou 6 Moushouden* or *Dynasty Warriors 7: Xtreme Legends*, thirteen of the sixty-five playable characters are women. This could signify a shift away from the presumed male point of view in action video games or it could merely be an effort to capture a larger consumer base to include women. Elisabeth Hayes, for instance, has observed how some recent video games allow women to explore the pleasures of masculine practices not normally associated with dominant narratives of gender identity (1). Anne Allison also points out that the marketing of women as superheroes in Japanese products localized for America is largely motivated by the consumer market. Allison proffers that “adding girls to the [Power] Ranger[s] team ... [was] popular with children of both genders and was applauded by many adults for its feminist politics: girls as tough fighters” (Allison, *Millennial Monsters* 149).

Koei's consumer base, however, most likely remains predominantly male. Kevin Schut concludes that the historical simulation video game genre, which is Koei's lifeblood, skews towards a predominantly male consumer base (220–222). I would argue that the presence of female characters offers male players the opportunity to control a female character and have her engage in movements that can sometimes become sexually suggestive. Koei's treatment of female playable characters engages in the specifically Japanese practice of “fanservice,” which Keith Russell defines as “the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures in Manga and Anime [such] as panty shots, leg spreads (spread legs) and glimpses of breasts” (Russell 107). Although such sexual content in Japan may seem misogynistic to the Western eye, Allison suggests a broader lens for consideration. In her discussion of eroticism in manga, Allison proffers her critique of “the generalizing and universalizing tendencies of [how Western feminists like] Dworkin and MacKinnon stand on pornography” by looking to nonwestern representations to examine “how a sexual practice or text may work for someone it gives pleasure to rather than merely against someone it ideologically oppresses” (Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires* 55). Erotic manga and hostess clubs are, as Allison proposes,

not entirely a product of misogyny inherent in Japanese culture, but they are also a product of the stringent demands of workplace productivity in Japan, where “there is little opportunity to play or relax except on the way to [or from] work or as a commodity bought with work” (Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited* 59). Allison explains that Japanese *Ero Manga*, of which fanservice is arguably a derivative subset, should be considered in the historical context of manga as a genre that

had cultural significance. It was a realm set aside for play (*asobi*) where ... social regulations and hierarchies operating elsewhere could be temporarily suspended. Play, escape, and sexuality thus intertwined semiotically and were given symbolic form and expression in manga artistry during this time [Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited* 56].

It is fitting, therefore, that fanservice should also apply to a modern form of play and escape: video games.

Fanservice also functions as a method of adaptation, concerning which Hutcheon theorizes, “the appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty” (Hutcheon 114). Fanservice adaptation allows the audience to experience a character with whom they may already be intimately familiar, but through a sexual lens which may not be intended or even possible in the original. *Hokoto Musou*, or *Fist of the North Star: Ken’s Rage*, features an explicit example of fanservice in its depiction of its only female playable character, Mamiya. In the manga and anime, Mamiya is a warrior who renounces her womanhood in defiance against the life of a concubine that she escapes from. She is normally dressed relatively modestly in a brown blouse with brass shoulder pads and brown pants that cover her entire body. Her costume in *Ken’s Rage*, in contrast, places her in form fitting armor with a completely translucent skirt which exposes her buttocks and black panties. Since the game features a third-person point of view from behind, Mamiya’s buttocks remain exposed for the player to view throughout gameplay. The downloadable content costume available for Mamiya takes fanservice to a more extreme level. The downloadable costume initially covers more of her body than her regular costume, but breaks off piecemeal as she takes damage. In its fully broken form, the costume appears as tattered scraps of white cloth that barely cover her breasts and buttocks. Her costuming therefore becomes a fanservice adaptation which, contrary to her personality in the original source, sexualizes her for the benefit and gaze of the player.

The progression of female costuming in the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise also suggests increasing levels of fanservice. *Dynasty Warriors* is itself a visual adaptation of the Chinese romance novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a canonical pillar of literature that most consumers throughout Asia are thor-

oughly familiar with. The game presents visualizations of women who are described in the original source as legendary beauties, as for instance Diao Chan whose sexuality plays the key role in the overthrow of the tyrant Dong Zhou early in the novel. As the *Dynasty Warriors* series has progressed, the women are generally more scantily clad. In *Dynasty Warriors 7*, the costumes for Zhen Ji and Diao Chan have been altered to show more skin, and the new character Bao Sanniang appears in virtually a bikini. As further fanservice, *Dynasty Warriors 7* makes available downloadable content costumes that place the female characters in modern Japanese schoolgirl uniforms.

Even more sexualized, however, is the new character Lian Shi, whose character model has disproportionately large, semi-exposed breasts, and who garners much attention in the cinematic cutscenes. In a cutscene entitled "Union" that depicts Sun Shang Xiang's betrothal to Liu Bei, the player's sight is immediately drawn to Lian Shi's breasts as the camera operates from the vantage point of Sun Shang Xiang speaking to her from above on horseback. The cutscene is a visual adaptation of the episode from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* when the Wu princess Sun Shang Xiang leaves her household to be married to the Shu ruler Liu Bei in order to forge an alliance between the two countries. In this embellished account in the game, Lian Shi leaves Sun Shang Xiang to become the consort of the Wu ruler Sun Quan. The scene implies that Lian Shi has been one of Sun Shang Xiang's armed attendant mistresses, who are described only generically in the novel. The entire scene visually reenacts the disarming of Sun Shang Xiang and her mistresses during her nuptials, an event in the literary source where women are treated as objects within commerce between men. Accordingly, by highlighting Lian Shi's partially exposed breasts, the cutscene also becomes a method of commerce between video game developers and the presumed male video gameplayer, who is able to visually feast upon a representation of a woman who cannot hold such proportions in real life.<sup>6</sup> In "A Dream Fulfilled," the final cutscene that plays upon successful completion of the Wu storyline, Sun Quan wakes up from a dream to the sight of Lian Shi's face and breasts. He then picks up his startled consort, carries her toward his companions, and declares, "Everyone! Let us enjoy this!" This final scene reiterates Lian Shi's place as a sexual commodity, and links the player's victory to a sexualized reward. Lian Shi's unrealistically-proportioned body is again highlighted in the forefront, as Sun Quan carries her towards the camera, as if to offer her directly to the viewer.

Such physical disproportionate representations of women are noticeably present in Koei's most recent entry into the *Warriors* series, *One Piece: Kaizoku Musou*, which will be localized and released in Europe and North America as *One Piece: Pirate Warriors* (Yip). The video game departs from the animation style of the manga and anime, with fanservice in mind, though not to the



degree of the film *One Piece the Movie: The Giant Mechanical Soldier of Karakuri Castle*. The game features three playable female characters: Nami, Nico Robin, and Boa Hancock. Boa Hancock's regular costume, a tight purple qipao that covers most of her upper torso, is relatively modest. Available as a separate download for Hancock, however, is her Amazon Lily costume, comprised of a red blouse that reveals much of her cleavage and a loose red sarong that exposes her legs and red panties. Nico Robin appears regularly in a tightly fitting black outfit with a low-cut bust-line. Nami, perhaps the most sexualized of the main heroines in *One Piece*, appears normally in a pink low-cut midriff top with matching short skirt. One of Nami's downloadable costumes, inspired by her clothing in the movie *One Piece: Strong World*, places her in a spaghetti strap top and tightly fitting cut-off jeans that conspicuously show the contours of her buttocks. Another of Nami's downloadable costumes dresses her in a loosely fitting kimono that is falling off her shoulders, the typical visual signifier in anime and manga of a courtesan or otherwise sexually available woman. These costumes bare the upper chest of the characters, which are noticeably inflated in the same manner as the fanservice movies when compared to the manga and anime.

By enhancing female characters with special costumes, players can maneuver and position the characters during actual gameplay in such a way as to catch glimpses of panties and cleavage. Such fan service in video games puts the presumed male player in control of the female character's body, and bends it to the will of his gaze. However, fanservice is an ancillary feature of the game designed for the presumably young, male, Japanese consumer base that purchases the *Warriors* series. Unlike *Duke Nukem* or *Outlaw Volleyball*, sex is not the main selling point of the *Warriors* games, and rather, they are marketed as military action titles. As a result, American purchasers are unlikely to be familiar with or even expect to encounter sexualized stereotypes in the games. American players, therefore, are allowed to distance themselves from any potentially sexist connotations of consuming such games by disavowing them as products of an Asian culture that has historically been stereotyped as unprogressive and even savage in comparison to the West, and therefore "Other." American players are able to except themselves from the imported products even while consuming them as fetishized commodities, especially when dressing up playable female characters in costumes that particularly mark them as ethnic such as Hancock's sarong, Nami's kimono, or the Japanese schoolgirl outfits in *Dynasty Warriors 7*. Thus the players are allowed to partake in a particular form of racial pleasure that coincides with what Helen Zia describes in America as "the pervasive image of the sexually exotic, available Asian woman," which is then excused since it seen as naturally occurring in Asian culture itself (Zia 132). American exceptionalism, specifically applied



to the “Othering” of foreign misogyny, has historically been used to justify colonial domination abroad as well as legal regulation of minority populations domestically. By taking an exceptionalist approach to consuming localized video games, coupled with the phenomenon of racial pleasure, players in America are permitted to veil persisting imbalances of race and gender within their own country, and even attitudes they might hold themselves, by deflecting those feelings onto the foreign “Other.”

## Conclusion: The Id and the Ego of Racial and Misogynistic Pleasure in Video Games

While participating in the anti-pornography movement among feminist legal scholars and activists in the 1990s, Judith Kegan Gardiner prophetically observed,

The substitution of relations with machines over relations with people affects more than pornography. It extends to automatic bank tellers, computerized work stations, and video games in arcades where boys zap cartoon enemies for hours. This crisis in representation also extends to the sense many people have that the media is becoming all-encompassing [Gardiner 330].

In his analysis of the susceptibility of video gameplayers to readily internalize stereotypic representations, Gotanda also notes the ability of video games to become all-encompassing, which he explains by evoking flow theory (“Computer Games” 931). Video games draw people especially into a state of flow as a player’s self-consciousness merges with a game character or avatar that they control (Chen et al. 263–281). Perhaps the most disturbing prospect of racial pleasure is that consumption of racial and sexual stereotypes through play has become somehow natural in American society.<sup>7</sup> My thesis particularly highlights the danger of cultural “Othering” when consuming localized video games, where players cease to be self-reflective, and where deeply seated prejudices and biases towards race and gender are overlooked in light of comparative cultural difference. The courts have already stated that they will not regulate even the most offensive content, but what racial pleasure shows us is that the greater problem is neutral content that accesses the unconscious racism and sexism that is nevertheless prevalent in American players and potentially more dangerous.

## NOTES

1. See Leonard, “Young, Black (& Brown)” 248–272, Barrett 95–119, and DeVane and Squire 264–285.

2. The software for *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* contained disabled content involving

interactive sex scenes. In the game, the player-controlled main character Carl Johnson is allowed to date various non-player characters. If a date goes particularly well, the girlfriend invites Carl in for "coffee" at her home when he drops her off, at which point the camera stays outside, but shakes for a moment while moans are heard. The software developers had included but disabled content allowing the player to engage in a mini-game depicting graphically rendered sexual intercourse. Though normally inaccessible to players, in June 2005, a mod patch for the game appeared which allowed players to access the disabled scenes. The fact that the context had been included in the first place triggered mass criticism of the game from educators and legislators.

3. *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Ass'n*; *Entertainment Software Ass'n v. Swanson*; *Entertainment Software Ass'n v. Granholm*; *Entertainment Software Ass'n v. Blagojevich*. More pertinently, video games depicting graphic violence and, in some cases even some sexual content, are also entitled to First Amendment protection: *Am. Amusement Machines Ass'n v. Kendrick*. The Courts have also held that the First Amendment protects video games that were alleged to desensitized children to violence and the value of human life in several wrongful death suits such as: *Wilson v. Midway Games*; *James v. Meow Media*.

4. The title of this article was inspired by the sidequest in *Yakuza: Deal Souls* where Kiryu encounters Kotomi, whom he hires as a hostess but sees devolving into a zombie before his eyes. I substituted the term "stripper" in place of "hostess" in my title, however, because of the same concerns with cultural context that Sega considered in localizing the franchise. Had I entitled my article "Zombie Hostess Geishas," it probably would not have carried the same resonance with most American readers who are unfamiliar with hostess clubs. The closest phenomenon in the United States to hostess bars is perhaps a hybrid of paid escorts and strippers. Hence, my title "Zombie Stripper Geishas" is my own attempt at localization for consumption by a predominantly American audience.

5. Neil Gotanda's brother, playwright Philip Gotanda, evokes the Rambo films as a commentary on the perpetuation of racism by Hollywood in his play *Yankee Dawg You Die*. The play features two characters who are Asian American actors. The elder, Vincent, has struggled through his career taking roles that perpetuate stereotypes of Asians. The younger, Bradley, complains "Every time you do any old stereotypic role just to pay the bills, someone has to pay for it—and it ain't you. No. It's some Asian kid innocently walking home. 'Hey, it's a Chinaman gook!' 'Rambo, Rambo, Rambo!'" (P. Gotanda 99).

6. See Martins, et al. 824–836.

7. In assessing the efficacy of equal protection laws in the United States, Charles Lawrence suggests that the push towards a status quo of color-blindness runs the danger of becoming blindness to color, and that the status quo of neutrality may potentially shield unconscious racism that is already entrenched in American society.

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**PART III. STORIES, STORIES  
EVERYWHERE (AND NOWHERE JUST  
THE SAME): TRANSMEDIA TEXTS**

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## CHAPTER 10

# “My name is Alan Wake. I’m a writer”: Crafting Narrative Complexity in the Age of Transmedia Storytelling

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MICHAEL FUCHS

Historically, game scholars have seen the concepts of gaming and narrative to be in relative conflict with one another, even while some of the most expressive ludologists and narratologists have accepted the entanglement of the two.<sup>1</sup> One critic, however, has correctly observed that “you can speak of the narrativity of computer games without reducing them to a form of novel or film, because novels, films and games exemplify different narrative modes” (Ryan 13). In particular, Marie-Laure Ryan calls attention to the fact that “the narrative potential of computer games is generally underdeveloped” (13). Yet, a number of games recently released have challenged this assumption. Remedy’s *Alan Wake* (2010) is but one recent video game to revel in its narrative potential.<sup>2</sup> The game’s story begins with the eponymous figure’s opening statement:

Stephen King once said that nightmares exist outside of logic and there’s little fun to be had in explanations; they’re antithetical to the poetry of fear. In a horror story, the victim keeps asking “why,” but there can be no explanation, and there shouldn’t be one. The unanswered mystery is what stays with us the longest and is what we’ll remember in the end. My name is Alan Wake. I’m a writer [*Alan Wake*].

*Alan Wake* complicates the conventionalized structures of the horror tale — especially as established by other visual media such as film and televi-



sion—to craft a *storyworld* that capitalizes on textual play and the player's complicity with this playfulness across media. In the process, *Alan Wake* turns a seemingly straightforward story about a man trying to save his beloved wife into a highly intertextual, metatextual, and complex narrative that even transcends the medium of the video game. In constructing a story around and through a character-narrator who is living the story that he, himself, has penned, *Alan Wake* introduces not only a set of innovative narrative strategies that may reshape—or even eliminate—the storytelling divide between video games and other visual media, but in doing so, it also disrupts conventions of spatial and temporal experience.

### The Narrative Complexities of *Alan Wake's* Self-Conscious Storytelling

Critically-speaking, narrative complexity has been discussed in relation to various forms of media. From the perspective of literary scholarship, Patrick O'Neill has suggested that narrative complexity can emerge from “focaliz[ing the] narrative through the eye of one (or several) of the characters,” but even more so from “characters [who] themselves can also be narrators (and focalizers) within the story and address their narratives to other characters who then serve as narratees” (112). Granted, the literary concepts of focalizers and narrators are generally hard to apply to moving images (including video games), but *Alan Wake's* presence as a character-narrator strongly facilitates the application of these narratological concepts. But, *Alan Wake* is not as simple as it might seem in its first few minutes, in which the opening cinematics introduce the titular character as the story's narrator, since *Alan Wake* challenges conventional storytelling as it presents a highly complex configuration of (intra-diegetic) storytelling agencies and self-reflexive narrative levels.

While postmodernist writers such as John Barth and Donald Barthelme would likely be proud of the construction of an author becoming part of his own story, *Alan Wake* adds a twist to this postmodernist trope, since Alan not only composes the events taking place in the game, but he also functions as a fictional character in a story written by a certain Thomas Zane. In other words, the events that unfold in front of Alan Wake's eyes are based on a novel written by Alan Wake, who is, however, a fictional character in a story written by Thomas Zane (who is, of course, a fictional character in a video game).<sup>3</sup> According to the mythology of *Alan Wake*, Thomas Zane was a best-selling poet who visited the small town of Bright Falls in the Pacific Northwest (the spatial setting of the game) at some point during the 1970s. He started to work on fantastic tales about Cauldron Lake and was confronted by the Dark

Presence that needed someone to, literally, write it into existence and which, some forty years later, would haunt another author, the eponymous Alan Wake. Zane appears in the first episode of the game as a godlike narrator figure (he emanates a bright light) who introduces Alan and the player to the things that they will have to face. Zane guides them through the game and becomes increasingly present towards the game's conclusion. The fact that Thomas Zane is the architect of the world that Alan knows becomes most explicit near the game's end when Alan, his literary agent Barry, and Bright Falls' sheriff, Sarah Breaker, arrive at the so-called "Well-Lit Room," in which Thomas Zane had hidden a weapon to defeat the Dark Presence. There, Alan finds a manuscript page, ostensibly written by himself: "The page was autobiographical, a page from my childhood, but I didn't write this. It was a page written by Thomas Zane. None of them were supposed to exist anymore." Then, Zane's voice appears:

Alan, who was seven years old, would fight sleep to the bitter end. When he did sleep, he soon woke up, screaming, the nightmares fresh in his mind. One evening, his mother sitting by his bed, his mother offered him an old light switch. She called it "The Clicker" and clicking on the switch would turn on a magical light that would drive the beasts away [*Alan Wake*].

This scene proves key to the narrative mystery. As a flashback sequence at the beginning of episode two shows, Alan gave The Clicker, which he now finds in a shoebox, to his wife Alice several years before the events in Bright Falls. In the flashback, Alan tells Alice, who suffers from nyctophobia (fear of the dark):

I used to have these nightmares when I was a kid. The dark really spooked me, too. When it got really bad, my mom gave me this old light switch. She called it "The Clicker".... If I ever got scared of the dark, I could flip the switch and a magic light would scare the monsters away [*Alan Wake*].

Thus, the cinematic sequence at the end of episode five reveals that, what Alan believes to be a childhood memory is, in fact, a memory constructed by Thomas Zane and implanted into Alan's (fictional) brain. His mother never really gave him an old light switch, for he merely plays his role in a fictional world crafted by an omnipotent author. The entire life of Alan Wake had been predetermined; he is an author who has been written into existence by another author. However, the end of the game adds yet another twist, as Alan Wake may be able to escape from his predetermined existence in a fictional world by completing the final page of the manuscript in a specific way (which Alan fails to find by game's close). Even though his life is thus predetermined to a great extent, the game's narrative suggests that Alan can still influence certain aspects of his life (not to mention build in sequels to the game). This experience mirrors the player's experience when playing *Alan Wake*.

Throughout the game, “there are periods in which the player is in control of gameplay and at others not, creating a dynamic rhythm between self-determination and pre-determination” (Krzywinska 207). As in many games, cinematics interrupt the interactive experience, taking “control away from the player and reinforc[ing] the sense that a metaphysical ‘authorial’ force is at work, shaping the logic of the game” (Krzywinska 211). Through this process, players become what media scholar Jeffrey Sconce has labeled “metareflexive”; that is, players become aware of the narration at work, allowing them to appreciate the “stylistic and narrational strategies as a vital component of the story world itself” (106). At the same time, however, their awareness of being limited by the rules of the game, of not being able to entirely freely roam the gameworld, of not being allowed a truly interactive experience, also increases, as their attention is drawn to the “shadowy ... supplement,” to interactivity that is interpassivity (Žižek). Through this inherent link between Alan’s and the player’s experience, *Alan Wake* counters the assumption that metatextuality would preclude immersion, which has haunted scholarship on self-reflexivity across media for decades. For example, film scholar Christopher Ames has argued that reflexivity “undermine[s] the realist illusion” (8), while Frank Furtwängler has even gone as far as claiming that “immersion can be conceived as the annihilation of the metacommunicative situation” (169).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, by mirroring the player’s experience in Alan’s, *Alan Wake*’s metatextual layer supports identification with the avatar and thus aids immersion in the gameworld rather than undermining it.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the analogies between the gameworld and the real world established through the link between the avatar and the player and the conflation of traditionally separate diegetic levels, as one narrator (Alan) becomes part of his story and another narratorial agency (Thomas Zane) functions as the narrator of an embedding narrative, are only the beginning of *Alan Wake*’s narrative complexities, since these are not the only spatio-temporal dimensions that are constantly transgressed in the game.

### Struggling with Non-Linear Storytelling in Linear Gameplay

*Alan Wake* is filled with cinematics and dream sequences (such as the lengthy opening cinematic that introduces the titular character and the game’s basic plot). As film and television scholars have noted, the breaking of traditional spatio-temporal constructions, primarily the move away from chronology, strongly contributes to the increase of narrative complexity.<sup>6</sup> While *Alan Wake*’s narrative complexity emerges, in part, out of such a spatio-temporal manipulation, it is also true that “videogame play offers a very different temporal



experience than our other media" (Atkins, "Killing Time" 251). Jesper Juul argues that playing "has a basic sense of happening *now*.... Pressing a key influences the game world, which then logically (and intuitively) has to be happening in the same *now*" ("Introduction" 134). As he notes elsewhere:

There is an inherent conflict between the now of the interaction and the past or "prior" of the narrative. You can't have narration and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story. The relations between reader/story and player/game are completely different — the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game ["Games Telling"].

*Alan Wake* complicates this operation by consciously conflating temporal dimensions. This process becomes most evident in the game text's use of the past tense in Alan's voiceovers, which constantly disrupt this "basic sense of happening *now*," since they highlight that everything experienced in the game has already happened. In *Alan Wake*, past, present, and future thus combine to form what Fredric Jameson referred to as a "perpetual present"; ergo, the compartmentalization of the three temporal dimensions becomes obsolete (28).

This conceptualization of time, of course, has important effects on the game's ending. Jesper Juul claims that, in contrast to other media, "in the computer game ... the ending is often well known, but it is one you try to *actualise* by your playing" ("A Clash" 5). *Alan Wake*, again, complicates matters. After all, Alan's novel *Departure* serves as the blueprint for the events unfolding in Bright Falls, and thus the ending should be known to Alan, even if he doesn't consciously remember it. In other words, the future, which has been composed in the past, finds its realization in the present moment of playing, and yet the ending remains unwritten — that is, open, unknown. This (non)ending draws players' attention to their reliance on narrative closure in video games by not providing one. By offering a nonending, *Alan Wake* combines strategies known from other media by disrupting traditional spatio-temporal constructions, including chronology and the perpetual present of gameplay to create an innovate narrative structure and increase narrative complexity.

However, the complexity of *Alan Wake*'s nonlinear narrative structures stand out even more in their disruptions of chronology through techniques such as flashbacks and flashforwards.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the game, flashbacks, dream sequences, and other embedded stories interrupt *Alan Wake*'s narrative and thus disrupt the temporal continuity of the narrative.<sup>8</sup> Even though most of the flashbacks and dream sequences are clearly marked in *Alan Wake* (via captions, the visual composition of certain events, or various forms of framing), there are moments in which this is not necessarily the case.<sup>9</sup> For example,



the first minutes of gameplay, introduced by the opening cinematic, are a visual manifestation of Alan's nightmare. There are several markers that suggest that these opening moments are not supposed to represent diegetic reality — whatever that is — such as Alan entering into the game chapter "Nightmare," Alan's use of the past tense, and his self-conscious observation that the action "followed a typical nightmare pattern," but all of these indicators are quickly forgotten once gameplay begins. For a short period of time, the events taking place in the perceived present moment of gaming become more important than the narrative frame that highlights the unreal character of the events. In this, *Alan Wake* emphasizes that the past is never fixed, but rather shaped by present experience (as the example of The Clicker has already shown). The game suggests the reverse to be true as well, especially in the memories of Alice's voice that haunt the present. Following Jacques Derrida, one can argue that "this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one" haunts Alan's present (6). Alice's specter "is not identifiable[;] one cannot see, localize, fix any form[;] one cannot decide between hallucination and perception," and thus it deconstructs the conventional borders between past and present (Derrida 136).

Indeed, the game's temporal confusion goes hand in hand with spatial confusion. Alice's voice (and all the flashbacks that appear throughout the game) disrupts not only the temporal but also the spatial order, since places are re-configured to an earlier state or site or even deconstructed, as "there are only displacements" (Derrida 136). Flashbacks and dream sequences become embedded narratives; from a narratological perspective, they become different diegetic levels (or spaces). Flashbacks and dream sequences are, however, not the only embedded narratives found in *Alan Wake*, as Alan (and the player) can actually watch television shows embedded throughout the game. All of these shows are presented as live-action material, contrasting and possibly commenting on the (fictional) worlds displayed on television within the game world, and adding yet another layer to the omnipresent metatextual topic of reality versus fiction. Although the shows are formally set against the reality of Alan's experience, the differentiation falls apart at the level of content. The episode "Quantum Suicide" of the intra-diegetic TV series *Night Springs*, for example, offers a template for what happens at the end of the game — when Alan exists in two realities (as two separate individuals) at the same time. The game's form-versus-content disconnect finds emphasis in Alan's appearance on numerous screens in the course of the narrative, and thus offers commentary on the events from another dimension of existence and, in certain ways, even warns Alan/the player about events to come.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to this form of spatial (dis)orientation, *Alan Wake* constructs yet another level of spatial confusion — one that results from the transgression

of diegetic levels mentioned above and one that also features warnings about things to come. In terms of spatial confusion, one should not forget that Alan Wake not only appears in but is actually living the story he has written (in a story of Thomas Zane). Here, the manuscript pages of Alan's novel *Departure*, which Alan/the player finds over the course of the game, create narrative divergences and complexities. Since *Departure* actually describes the events that happen to Alan in Bright Falls, some manuscript pages provide uncanny moments of foreshadowing when past narration and its present reception foretell things in the near future. A little over halfway through episode two, for example, Alan finds the following manuscript page:

The night had been one desperate situation after another. I was exhausted and my body felt as though it had been chewed up and spat out.

The flashlight was heavy in my hand, and each pull of the trigger sent a painful shock up my arm. But I was finally out of the woods and things were looking up.

That's when I heard the chainsaw [*Alan Wake*].

It comes as no surprise that only seconds later, Alan and the player can hear the sound of a chainsaw and a huge so-called Taken (a human being possessed by the Dark Presence) attacks. Not only do past, present, and future eerily converge in this moment, but the embedded narrative (which is both embedded and, at the same time, embedding the story of the game) foretells and, more importantly, actually *becomes* the diegetic action. The confusion of diegetic levels arguably culminates towards the end of the game (and continues in the two additional episodes available as downloadable content), as objects in the gameworld are represented as words, written into existence (to the sound of a typewriter) once Alan has pointed his flashlight at the respective objects. In these moments, Alan is no longer part of a story that has already been written, but rather, he is writing the story in the same moment that he is experiencing it. From another perspective, past and present again converge, as the past drafting of *Departure* finds its present counterpart in Alan's actions.

### Compounding the Overlapping Narrative through Self-Reflexive, Transmedia Storytelling

A further feature of contemporary storytelling that only adds to the complexity of the storyworld created by the game emerges from what Henry Jenkins terms "transmedia storytelling" in his book *Convergence Culture*. *Bright Falls* (2010), the six-episode web series released around the same time as the video game,<sup>11</sup> highlights the manner in which the game, the web series, and the transmedial world that has developed around Alan Wake and the town of

Bright Falls integrate different media's conventions to create new ones (Klas-trup & Tosca 2004). Jenkins defines a transmedia story as a narrative that

unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.... [I]n the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through gameplay or experienced as an amusement park attraction.... Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption [97–98].

The web series *Bright Falls*, the tone of which (like that of the game) is reminiscent of *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–1991) and other works of David Lynch, launches *Alan Wake* into the realm of transmedia.<sup>12</sup> Instead of focusing on the character Alan Wake, *Bright Falls* centers on the town of Bright Falls and tells the story of a reporter named Jake Fischer, who comes to town in order to interview Dr. Hartman (who also appears in the game) about his latest book. Upon his arrival in Bright Falls, Jake enters the local diner, where the audience meets some characters known from the game, including Alan Wake (albeit merely in the form of a cardboard cutout). After leaving the diner, Jake runs over a deer. While examining the dying animal, Jake hears noises, and although he thinks he may see something moving in the bushes, he decides to drive on. After taking a hotel room, Jake lies down in bed. Suddenly, he can hear some noises outside, and when he opens the curtains to look, a bright light disrupts the darkness of the night. The way the scene is shot eerily resembles a number of alien abduction movies, implying that the same basic scenario is at play in *Bright Falls*, but knowledge of the game suggests that it might rather be Thomas Zane in his god-like diver's suit floating outside the building, probably informing Jake about things to come. Yet, an unexpected cut to the next morning prevents the audience from witnessing Jake's reactions and/or identifying the source of the light. Jake seems incredibly calm as he drives through the town, again entering the diner, where Rose, the waitress (who plays a small but significant role in the game), is watching an Alan Wake interview on YouTube. Jake meets Ellen, an old friend, and their behavior suggests that they used to be more than just friends.

When Jake finally meets Dr. Hartman at Cauldron Lake Lodge for the interview, Hartman is startled by Jake's intended use of a camcorder to record the interview, asking him to write instead. As the interview unfolds, Hartman explains the reasons for writing his latest book: "For years, I dealt with patients who seemed lost, trapped in a reality of their own devising." This short sentence shows why Alice Wake might have wanted Alan to consult Dr. Hartman, thus helping the audience better understand her motivations for bringing them to the small town of the game's setting. Hartman and Jake don't talk



long before Jake's thoughts get lost, culminating in a montage of shots that include Rose, Jake running over the deer, and a dead rodent which stylistically resembles the iconic heroin shooting scene in Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2000). The montage concludes in a close-up of Jake's right eye, which provides both a link to the first TV that seemingly automatically turns on in the game (which displays nothing but a wide-open human eye) and, of course, another allusion to Aronofsky's film. Jake suddenly finds himself back in front of Dr. Hartman, saying goodbye, without any memory of what happened in the last few minutes. Soon, though, he discovers his interview notes, indicating that he had, indeed, talked to Hartman for quite some time. The entire sequence underlines the process of writing, first by Hartman's request that Jake take notes rather than record the interview, and then by Jake's reconstruction of the interview based on his notes. Through this emphasis on writing, *Bright Falls* consciously establishes a link to the game, in which writing — as indicated above — proves extremely important to the plot.

Yet, the focus on writing provides not the only connection to the game, as *Bright Falls* also employs similar techniques when it comes to presenting its narrative. As in *Alan Wake*, temporal and spatial confusion are central not only to the plot but also to the way in which the narrative is presented. For example, at one point, Jake watches himself taking his own hotel room apart. Whereas some days earlier, it had been a written text (his own notes) that helped him reconstruct his own past experience, this time it is moving images. The scene of Jake watching his own doings is thoughtfully constructed: Jake's reflection partly overlaps with the images of Jake seen on the TV screen, indicating not only that Jake's body hosts two separate beings, but also that these two beings have things in common beyond outside appearance (creating a contrast to Alan and his double in the game, who seemingly only share outside appearance). After a very brief shot/reverse shot sequence that alternates between Jake and the screen, the camera focuses on Jake's face while slowly moving around. In this way, the sounds of destruction (from the night before), Jake's (present) reactions to his actions, and the visual outcome of his destructive force (albeit blurry in the background) can be perceived simultaneously, creating a temporal space that accommodates the past and the present. Additionally, the scene emphasizes the similarities of Alan and Jake. Not only are both Alan and Jake writers, but both of them find themselves in schizophrenic situations where their mental knowledge of past events differs from their bodily experience. Likewise, in both cases, televised images help to reconstruct part of that knowledge.

Confused by the experiences of his few days in Bright Falls, Jake requests that Ellen drive him out of town. Watching the town sign disappears in the rearview mirror, Ellen protests: "Why did you even come looking for me?"



You could have just driven yourself.” Jake responds in a downhearted way: “No, I couldn’t have. I’m not in control.” Suddenly, Ellen disappears and Jake finds himself alone in his car, just entering the municipal area of Bright Falls. Jake panics and brakes hard. What at first appear to be the shadows of trees turn into a dark fog representing the Dark Presence. As the fog closes in on the car, Jake mysteriously disappears. In the final episode’s conclusion, Alan Wake passes Jake’s car and drives towards Bright Falls.

Even though the *Bright Falls* series largely lacks the high degree of self-reflexivity of *Alan Wake*, Jake’s final words — that he is not in control — resonate with the game’s narrative and players’ engagement with it. Jake has become aware of the fact that his life is predetermined to a great extent, just as Alan realizes that he plays his part in a story that he has penned and the player comes to realize that, no matter how open a game world may seem, it has its limits. Together, game and web series add depth to the characterization of a number of Bright Falls’ inhabitants, including Alan Wake, while they also expand the more general mythology of Bright Falls. Indeed, in yet another self-conscious twist, *Alan Wake* highlights the importance of transmedia narratives in our day and age through its most prominent intra-diegetic story world, the *Night Falls* universe. After all, the television show *Night Falls* presents only part of a transmedia story world that incorporates at least video games and board games (thus also reflecting on the roots of video gaming). All in all, *Alan Wake* shows that it “is not only deeply invested in telling a story, but in exploring how stories are told across media” (Gonzales).

## And For All That Complexity, Is There a Game in Here?

While “[n]arrative still remains in the background a great deal of the time ... even in the more story-oriented games of progression,” narrative takes center stage in *Alan Wake* (King & Krzywinska 46).<sup>13</sup> Its complex story that combines high levels of self-awareness and intertextuality while constantly disrupting spatio-temporal stability echoes the playfulness of the postmodernist literatures of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Woody Allen, and others. To that, add the complexity of transmedia storytelling in the age of remix culture, and *Alan Wake* offers itself as an example of a highly complex “game fiction” about crafting stories (or, rather, storyworlds) (Atkins, *More* 9). Indeed, while Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska have suggested that “it is not possible to say with any certainty that players *play for* the narrative ... rather than enjoying the gameplay as much as, or more than, the access it gives to narrative progression,” I would argue that in the case of *Alan Wake*

with its, admittedly, monotonous gameplay, gamers do play *for* the narrative (46). In addition, already more than a decade ago, Andrew Darley claimed that “the space for reading or meaning-making in the traditional sense is radically reduced in computer games ... [and] the much maligned ‘passive’ spectators of conventional cinema might be said to be far more active than their counterparts in the newer forms” (164). Yet, I would argue that when playing *Alan Wake*, gamers just as much use the analog controller in their hands to play the game as they cognitively play with the meaning potentials that the narrative opens up, gaining as much pleasure from playing the game as from playing with the complex game text.

The openness resulting from this textual complexity “invites participation” and “emphasizes the opportunities for exchange and for change” that are so central to media texts in the convergence culture of the early twenty-first century (Edwards xvii). Essentially, *Alan Wake* presents a textbook example of a new contract between player and game that is no longer only based on immersion, identification, and gameplay as such, but also on storytelling. While Gordon Calleja correctly discusses narrative as one of six aspects that aid player immersion in a game, it may be that narrative helps less in involvement in a game than it does in making a transmedia storyworld (37). Through its textual openness, *Alan Wake* establishes a kind of meta-contract with its interpretive communities. Thus, the video game tries to provide entry points for practically everyone. Considering that this means offering entry points to audiences of different ethnic and/or national identities,<sup>14</sup> different genders, different educational backgrounds, etc., this is no small achievement, indeed.

## NOTES

1. See Gonzalo Frasca’s “Ludologists Love Stories, Too” (2003) for a description of the, at times, highly aggressive and polemical dispute between ludologists and narratologists, as well as an early attempt to smooth the waters.

2. Just as I was preparing this piece, IGN ran a three-part feature on storytelling in games (Shea & Kolan). The games mentioned by members of the gaming industry as the most outstanding examples of storytelling include *BioShock* (2K Boston, 2007), *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000), *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998), *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010), *ICO* (Team Ico, 2001), *Mass Effect* and its sequel (BioWare, 2007; 2010), and *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego, 2010).

3. Many of these structural games can also be found in the game’s follow-up, *Alan Wake’s American Nightmare*, at the end of which Alan finds himself in a movie-within-a *Night Springs* episode he had written. *American Nightmare* also plays with spatio-temporal confusion, since Alan is stuck in a time loop.

4. My translation of “Immersion kann man als eine Aufhebung der metakommunikativen Situation begreifen.”

5. In *Selbstreflexivität im Computerspiel* (2008), Bernhard Rapp provides a catalog of functions of self-consciousness in video games, including immersion and coherency (147–182). For additional thoughts on self-awareness in *Alan Wake*, see Gonzales (2010) and Fuchs (2012).

6. See, for example, Jason Mittell's seminal "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television" (2006) and the "Complex Narratives" special issue of *Film Comment* (31.1–2; 2006). In his contribution to the issue, Michael Z. Newman argues that "character is one aspect that may be evaluated in terms of complexity" (90). As complex as its narrative structure may be, *Alan Wake's* characters are rather flat.

7. The question of avatar death also seems relevant here. As Souvik Mukherjee has noted, in any game "the actions do not happen once, but both as one and many at the same time.... [A]s any gamer knows, these narratives keep overlapping and there is both difference and repetition amongst the countless potential or actualised trajectories." In other words, the experience of playing video games is necessarily non-linear, as avatar death leads to repetition. *Alan Wake's* use of flashbacks and flashforwards is, however, more novel, which is why I focus on this aspect.

8. While in narratology, the term "embedded narrative" is generally used to refer to any story-within-the-story structure, Henry Jenkins has reserved the term for a specific case of embedding narrative information about the past into games as a result of which "[t]he game world becomes a kind of information space, a memory place" ("Game Design" 126). I am using the term in its broader sense.

9. It may be mentioned that there are also sections of the game that formally suggest being not real due to their surreal character, but which are still supposed to take place in reality.

10. Remedy Entertainment's earlier commercial hits *Max Payne* and *Max Payne 2* employ a similarly disjointed spatio-temporal structure, featuring dream sequences, TVs-within-the-video games, comics-within-the-games, etc.

11. Episodes 1–4 were released prior to the game worldwide; the issue is a little more complicated with episodes 5 and 6, since one has to take into account that, on the one hand, the series was distributed both through its dedicated website and Xbox Live, where, on the other hand, content is generally not released simultaneously worldwide. An added complication is that the game was also not released on the same day worldwide. For someone like me with access to the Austrian Xbox Live Marketplace, episode 5 was available the day before the game's release, while episode 6 was available the day after.

12. The web series is but one piece of the transmedia narrative that has emerged around the video game, which I have decided to focus on here for its similarities to the game in terms of narrative techniques. In addition to the web series, a novelization and *The Alan Wake Files* have been published, and the abovementioned second game of the series. However, as Henry Jenkins has pointed out, "the [story]world is bigger ... than the franchise" (*Convergence* 116). Like movie and TV fans, who "write stories and songs and films or vids about or set in film and television's storyworlds" (Gray 2), "gamers are similarly motivated to create their own original fictional narratives based upon and around videogames" (J. Newman 51), thus "expand[ing] the world in a variety of directions" (Jenkins, *Convergence* 116). As a result, there are numerous pieces of fan fiction and fan art as well as fan vids available on the web.

13. In "The Open and the Closed," Jesper Juul differentiates between "games of emergence" and "games of progression." In games of emergence, some simple rules serve as the basis for numerous variations. For Juul, this is "the primordial game structure ... found in card and board games and in most action and all strategy games" (324). In games of progression, on the other hand, the player is confronted with a number of challenges in serial form, requiring the player to perform "a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game" (324). Games of progression are "games with cinematic or story-telling ambitions" (324).

14. See, for example, Vinh Nguyen's fan vids that highlight the absence of non-white characters in *Alan Wake* and *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*.

## CHAPTER 11

# Millions of Voices: *Star Wars*, Digital Games, Fictional Worlds and Franchise Canon

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FELAN PARKER

“I felt a great disturbance in the Force, as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced.” — Obi-Wan Kenobi, *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*

In today’s transmedia landscape, debates over canon and canonicity emerge with great urgency. If a story develops across multiple media, what is essential to the cosmology of the franchise? Which aspects of it are authentic? And who makes those decisions? When do franchise texts count as legitimate and canonical, and when are they secondary or peripheral? The industry, franchise producers, critics, and fans attend closely to such questions throughout the development and reception of franchise texts or products. George Lucas’s *Star Wars* saga, easily one of the most prominent and popular transmedia franchises, offers a rich field to study discourses and practices of canon, to tease out their implications, and to reconsider their terms. Like other franchises with active fan communities, the *Star Wars* franchise has come to be defined by its emphasis on a singular, cohesive canon and larger fictional universe. Through various “official” and “unofficial” articulations of this canon, and the attendant debates, a *multiplicity* of seemingly unified visions of the *Star Wars* universe are, and have been, articulated.

Since the 1982 release of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* for the Atari 2600, videogames have played an increasingly central role in the *Star Wars* franchise as the medium has come into its own as a cultural form. But how



can the interactive, playable, non-linear nature of digital games be rationalized as part of a singular, continuous canon centered on the six *Star Wars* feature films? Digital games sometimes allow for significant variation even within the basic experience of gameplay. For example, many *Star Wars* games, including the critically acclaimed *Knights of the Old Republic* series, the *Jedi Knight* series, and the more recent *Force Unleashed* games, present players with the choice between branching good and evil storylines — between following the light and dark sides of the Force — each with a completely different ending based upon the moral implications of the choices that the player makes. Can any *one* of these storylines be considered more true or authentic for the expansive fictional universe of *Star Wars*? If some of these ways of playing are more canonical or “official” than others, then the discourse of canon and continuity effectively invalidates certain experiences of the *Star Wars* franchise, relegating them to the status of apocrypha or, worse, inconsequential ephemera.

This chapter considers the theoretical and methodological implications of the tensions produced in transmedia franchises for scholars examining them, looking not only to the “official” canon put forward by Lucasfilm but also to fan versions of the canon such as the Wookieepedia,<sup>1</sup> Nathan P. Butler’s “Star Wars Timeline Gold,” and Joe Bongiorno’s “Complete Saga of the Star Wars Expanded Universe.” Such sources are key to the discussion of transmedia franchises because, adopting the language of Rick Altman’s genre theory, franchise canon and continuity “serve diverse groups diversely” (207). In order to fully understand the meaning of *Star Wars* games and their imaginary worlds, they must be situated as part of a heterogeneous network of discourse and practice, as sites where many different “users” of the franchise compete for legitimacy. By analyzing how continuity is asserted in the face of the non-linearity of digital game fictions and the overwhelming incoherence and complexity of transmedia franchises, and by questioning the tendency to emphasize coherence, singularity, and continuity in academic work dealing with franchise media, this essay will illustrate a critical approach that better accounts for the multiplicity inherent in both digital games and franchises. The peculiarities of digital games as a cultural form illuminate and exacerbate existing tensions and cracks in the dominant discourse of canon and continuity. These tensions must not be ignored or glossed over in favor of neat hierarchies of primary and secondary texts; they necessitate and enable a critical rethinking of how transmedia franchises work.

The term “canon” in this context is adopted from its use in actual fan and industry discourse to describe both the authenticity or legitimacy of individual franchise texts and accepted truths about the fictional universe those texts describe. This usage is related to the more conventional notion of a canon of great works, but it is specific to a given franchise and is concerned

not only with quality but also with fictional consistency. Canonicity is a quality ascribed to legitimate texts. The religious implications of the term are apt, given the almost religious fervor that fans hold for the “sacred texts” of a franchise (one need only consider fan reactions to George Lucas’s perceived tampering with the *Star Wars* films in various special editions to see this is not an exaggeration). In a sense, franchise canon possesses an aura, that special quality of authenticity and originality. However, unlike the well-worn Benjaminian conception of the artistic aura that is destroyed by mechanical reproduction, this authenticity is no longer associated with any one individual object but rather with a singular, transcendent story world that is established by the “original” texts and expanded by subsequent additions. The authenticity and legitimacy of franchise texts are measured according to their perceived fidelity to this ideal fictional universe: canonical texts derive their value from the aura, while non-canonical texts are denied legitimacy. This, of course, is backwards: in fact, the story world and its aura are produced and constructed through the canonization of franchise texts, not the other way around. The construction and maintenance of franchise canon is an active, dynamic, and multiple process that belies the complete *lack* of consistency or consensus inherent in its own construction.

Adaptation studies has long understood this. As Brian MacFarlane writes, “the insistence on fidelity has led to a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation” (387), while Dudley Andrew suggests a sociological turn away from discussions of fidelity, so that adaptation can be used “as we use all cultural practices, to understand the world from which it comes and the one toward which it points” (378, 380). Rather than obsessing over the authenticity of adaptations, authenticity and the socio-cultural processes by which it is constructed become the object of study. Unfortunately, the study of transmedia franchises has tended to reproduce rather than examine such processes. Still, by constituting a literal space for play within the *Star Wars* franchise, digital games counteract and destabilize the purportedly unified and authentic *Star Wars* canon, laying bare the multiplicity of the transmedia franchise as a complex, incoherent network of texts, meanings and users.

## Establishing/Creating Canon from the Multiplicity

As Will Brooker has demonstrated, canon in the *Star Wars* franchise is a highly contentious battleground. In addition to the many competing notions, both “official” and “unofficial,” of what elements are and are not canonical in a given text, the complexities and incoherencies of such a long-running and

expansive franchise make it impossible to pin down any fixed, singular canon. However, as Brooker argues, fan culture thrives on debate, and there seems to be little interest in consensus or compromise in debates about canon; after all, it wouldn't be any fun if everyone agreed (113).<sup>2</sup> In addition to the logistical challenges presented by the multiplicity of competing perspectives, the analysis of franchise canon is complicated by the constantly shifting nature of these very discourses. Over time, "official" and fan conceptions of the canon are adapted repeatedly to account for new additions to the franchise. Changes, additions, and subtractions to the various special editions of the *Star Wars* films, retroactive modifications to continuity necessitated by new canonical franchise texts (such as the prequel trilogy), and partially- or wholly-abandoned texts (such as the 1978 "*Star Wars* Holiday Special") have each, in turn, required the re-framing of many other aspects of the canon and continuity, as well as the fictional cosmology, of the *Star Wars* universe.

Officially-licensed publications such as *Star Wars Insider* magazine, Stephen Sansweet's *Star Wars Encyclopedia* (1998–2008), and the ongoing series of *Essential Guides* to *Star Wars* characters, timelines, fictional weapons and technology, and so on (1995–present), have all served to document, maintain, update, and distribute the "official" Lucasfilm version of the *Star Wars* canon. In 2000, however, Lucas Licensing established for its own, exclusively-internal use the Holocron continuity database. Leland Chee, a *Star Wars* fan and former LucasArts video game tester, was hired to be the "Keeper of the Holocron." This database, named for a fictional Jedi information-storage technology, more-or-less a cube of memory, is currently considered the highest authority in *Star Wars* canon by Lucasfilm as well as by most fans — its statements on canon and continuity are cited on virtually all fan timelines and throughout the Wookieepedia. According to a 2008 *Wired* interview with Chris Baker, Chee's job is to index the up-to-date canonicity of virtually every conceivable aspect of the franchise — from films and books, to toys and games, to characters and places, to ideas and abstract concepts like The Force — and to work alongside Lucasfilm creators to ensure that continuity is maintained. "The thing about *Star Wars* is that there's one universe. Everyone wants to know stuff, like, where did Mace Windu get that purple lightsaber? We want to establish that there's one and only one answer," Chee explains, demonstrating his dedication to the ideal of a unified canon (quoted in Baker). Chee also blogs and answers user-submitted questions on the official *Star Wars* website, via Twitter and Facebook, and in *Star Wars Insider* magazine, thus acting as a gatekeeper and mediator between the "official" Lucasfilm canon and fans.

The Holocron database is divided into five categories. "G-canon" is the inviolable (but unpredictable and shifting) George Lucas Canon, comprising



the six main *Star Wars* films and all other ideas originating with Lucas. “T-canon,” or Television Canon, includes recent television productions such as the computer-animated *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* series (2008–present) and a long-gestating but still untitled live-action series. “C-canon” is the Continuity Canon, mostly made up of texts from what is often called the “Expanded Universe,” including canonical-but-not-primary texts such as novels, comic books, and straight-to-video films, all of which are considered fully canonical except when contradicted by G- or T-canon sources. The majority of *Star Wars* games, including digital games, board and card games, and tabletop role-playing games, are categorized as C-canon, and thus as part of the Expanded Universe. “S-canon” (Secondary Canon) consists of mostly older, outdated texts (such as the earliest *Star Wars* novels) and elements of texts that, while not explicitly contradicted by canonical texts, are not considered essential to continuity. S-canon texts may be freely embraced or ignored by creators. Finally, “N-canon” (Non-canon) contains the apocrypha of the *Star Wars* franchise: those elements that have been removed from canon (such as the Holiday Special), that are deliberately separate from canon (such as the “what if” stories depicted in *Star Wars: Infinities* comics), or that are otherwise inconsistent or incompatible with higher levels of canon (Baker). Only N-canon texts are positioned completely outside the “official” canon, with the other four levels representing varying degrees of wiggle room *within* continuity for creators.

It is important to note that, although these categories may seem strict, part of the function of the Holocron is to enable and track the *movement* of texts and elements between categories over time. If an S-canon or non-canonical element is referenced in a G-, T-, or C-canon text, it is ratified and gets “upgraded” in the Holocron hierarchy. For example, the Galactic capital planet of Coruscant, previously featured only in *Star Wars* novels, was up-jumped from C-canon to G-canon after the release of the prequel film trilogy, which depicted the planet (Baker). Likewise, early novels such as Alan Dean Foster’s *Splinter of the Mind’s Eye* were initially received as fully canonical but have subsequently been demoted to secondary canon (Problematically, the novel develops a romantic relationship between Luke and Leia Skywalker, who were later revealed in the films to be siblings). Fan fiction, fan films, and other fan productions, as well as fan versions of *Star Wars* canon and chronology, are completely absent from the Holocron (They don’t even merit N-canon status in the “official” categorization.), and Chee has emphatically denied that a fan canon (popularly referred to as “fanon”) exists or can exist: “I don’t like the term. There’s no such thing as fan continuity” (quoted in Baker).<sup>3</sup> The activity and engagement of fans, evidently, is an ephemeral discourse and practice that exists beyond even apocrypha according to the dominant “official” version of the *Star Wars* canon.



## Playing Games with the Canon

Digital games, as a cultural form and as *Star Wars* texts, offer a unique opportunity to interrogate the construction and organization of the “official” *Star Wars* canon, as well as the relationship between “official” and “unofficial” discourses and practices within transmedia franchises in general. As Jesper Juul suggests, digital games can be productively understood as a negotiation between rule-based systems and fiction (1). The complex process of adapting certain aspects of a fictional world into a coherent and enjoyable rule-based system can thus be observed in games based on existing fictional universes such as the *Star Wars* franchise. For example, in many *Star Wars* games the player’s avatar has, or can obtain, Force powers. In G-canon texts, the Force is an invisible, silent, magical field that only becomes visibly manifest in certain situations (such as Emperor Palpatine’s deadly Force lightning in *Return of the Jedi*). Digital games, however, tend to visualize these powers. In *Super Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1994), the Force is represented as sparkling yellow and orange lights accompanied by a tinkling sound; in more recent games, such as *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* (2008), it is depicted as an ethereal, gaseous blue cloud and sounds like gusting wind. In some cases, light and dark powers are color-coded blue or green and red (presumably by analogy to the color-coded lightsabers of good and evil Jedi in the *Star Wars* films). This kind of audiovisual feedback is useful from a game design standpoint: the player needs to visualize and understand what’s going on, and whether their inputs are working the way they intend. A related instance of the necessary mediation of canon for the purposes of gameplay is the curtailing or scaling of these powers. In many *Star Wars* games, the player must gradually unlock Force powers that may otherwise be considered standard for the character in question in order to preserve the difficulty curve of the game and the pacing of the narrative. In other words, if an avatar based on Luke Skywalker commanded the full power of the Force at the beginning of a game, a player might be invincible and thus could easily finish the game in short order. This allowable flexibility of canon acts in service of both the player’s experience of the game and the unfolding of the game’s fiction, as well as Lucasfilm’s profit margin. Additionally, in games that are based directly on other *Star Wars* texts, canonical scenarios may be extended or contracted for the sake of gameplay, producing new, playable versions of iconic scenes that do not match their cinematic counterparts, as in the first *Star Wars* game, *The Empire Strikes Back*, which is based entirely on the famous battle scene on Hoth (“Canon”).

In spite of their incongruity with more canonical representations in other media, the game design strategies listed above are nevertheless central to an enjoyable gaming experience. This general tension between rules and fiction

is framed in discourses of canon as a sort of grey-area, wherein games, given their lower status in the official franchise hierarchy, are allowed leeway with the canon in service of playability and marketability. According to the Wookieepedia and other sources, while the fictional elements of *Star Wars* games — the stories, scenarios, settings, and characters — are canonical, game mechanics are allowed artistic license, related to the particularities of their different media. It has been stated that, “the overall scenario and documentation (cutscenes, manuals, strategy guides, etc) are proper [Expanded Universe]. This, however, doesn’t apply to ‘game mechanics’ and stats” (“Canon”). In the same way that variation in audiovisual style is allowed within the canon (consider the impressionistic watercolors of the *Star Wars: Dark Empire* comic books, and the polygonal, exaggerated cartoon style of the CGI-animated *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* TV shows), game mechanics are discursively framed as a superficial, interpretive aspect of a text that does not subvert the more fundamental canonicity of the game’s fiction.

Yet, in games, narratives sometimes end abruptly, without conclusion or resolution. In most *Star Wars* games, it is possible for the player’s avatar to die, and in virtually *all* games it is possible for the player to fail, abandon, ignore, or otherwise not fulfill the game’s narrative arc. Perhaps unsurprisingly, failure, a fundamental aspect of gameplay, is also considered non-canonical. It is assumed that the canonical version of a digital game’s narrative is “the fullest and best” outcome possible: *Star Wars* video game protagonists “Kyle Katarn, Keyan Farlander, Maarek Stele, Jaden Korr, etc. never failed their quests” (“Canon”). Playing a *Star Wars* game successfully is seen as *adhering to* or performing the canon, and failure to complete the game is, therefore, non-canonical. As Alexander Galloway convincingly argues, however, digital games as a medium encompass the entire gaming context of culture, player, software, and hardware; the notion that the canonical ideal of success can stand in for every other possible iteration of the gaming context is, from this perspective, highly suspect (2). Even in the most linear games, such as *Star Wars: Rebel Assault* (1993), the player is presented with affordances and limitations, producing a space of possibility within which the player is able to act more or less freely. Accordingly, the choice of weapons, powers, moves, and strategies will vary significantly from player to player. To make matters even more complicated, many more recent *Star Wars* games present an even more open possibility space for non-linearity and variation in gameplay. Games such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) and *Star Wars: Jedi Knight—Jedi Academy* (2003) offer players a wide range of customizable options for their avatar, from physical appearance to statistics representing abilities and powers, and feature branching storylines with multiple conclusions, usually demarcated as “good” (or light side) and “bad” (or dark side)

endings. The player, in these cases, has an influence far beyond the minutiae of moment-to-moment gameplay, which extends to the narrative continuity of the *Star Wars* imaginary universe. These are highly desirable aesthetic features in digital games. Gamers and critics alike tend to fetishize non-linearity and player choice as essential features of the best digital games. The discourse of canon and continuity must consequently account for such features in a way that satisfies the privileged ideal of a unified, coherent fictional universe.

Smaller player decisions such as those involved in tactics, strategy, and the specific events of any given play-through are easily reconciled as part of the artistic license that excuses game mechanics. Games, by nature, offer varied experiences, but these slight variations are unlikely to present serious threats to the sanctity of canon. Avatar customization, on the other hand, presents a rather tricky challenge. Is the main character of a *Star Wars* narrative canonically male or female? Human, Rodian, Hutt, or Twi'lek? What do they look like, and what clothing do they wear? According to the logic of canon, in which Lucasfilm and *Star Wars* fans alike are deeply invested, these questions are hugely significant and must be answered unambiguously. Most sources, "official" and "unofficial," state that, if avatar customization is allowed in a *Star Wars* game, the canonical version of that character is assumed to be male and human ("Canon").<sup>4</sup> Although it is not made explicit for obvious ideological reasons, it would not be a stretch to add "white" and "heterosexual" to that list.<sup>5</sup> These partially-unwritten rules of avatar identity are problematic from a sociopolitical perspective, but they also usefully highlight some of the underlying tensions and contradictions that discourses of canon by nature attempt to erase to produce the semblance of unity.

Narrative choices in digital games create even larger problems of continuity. Even some games that are carefully woven into the mythology of *Star Wars*, such as the *Force Unleashed* series, offer players branching narratives. The choice between good and bad endings has become a familiar, marketable feature in *Star Wars* games (and indeed, in games generally). According to Lucasfilm, in games with multiple diverging endings, the light side ending is always canonical. When summarizing the canonical narrative of digital games, the Wookieepedia and other fan timelines likewise generally assume that the player made exclusively "good" choices throughout, the implication being that this comes under the same heading as player failure. As noted above, the "fullest and best" outcome is always considered canonical:

In side-choosing games such as the *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* series and *Dark Forces* saga where the player has the choice between light side and dark side, as of yet, the light side ending has been verified as canonical by Lucasfilm in all games.... Wookieepedia articles assume that the player picks the light side choice for all scenarios; therefore, even the secondary choices and



events pertaining to the dark side or triggered by relevant choices, are considered non-canon ["Canon"].

However, unlike an avatar's death (which, within the structure of a game, is usually understood to be a negative, undesirable outcome for the player), making evil choices, developing dark Force powers, and pursuing a dark side ending are not at all analogous to a *failure* to complete the game. It is completely inaccurate to refer to a player who deliberately finishes *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* with an evil avatar as unsuccessful. This problem arises most obviously in games which have direct sequels. If a player achieves the dark side ending of *Star Wars: Dark Forces II—Jedi Knight* (1997), his or her avatar, Kyle Katarn, becomes a new evil galactic Emperor; upon playing the sequel, *Star Wars: Jedi Knight II—Jedi Outcast* (2002), the player will be disappointed to learn that their avatar does not start the game as a cruel, all-powerful Sith dictator, but rather as a pure, noble, evil-vanquishing Jedi hero. The troublesome distinction between canonical and non-canonical player choices breaks down even further when one considers games such as the *Knights of the Old Republic* series that allow the player to remain in a neutral middle ground between dark and light in the course of a branching narrative (although the ending is ultimately binary). The potential for narrative and moral variety and ambiguity presented by digital games is largely unaccounted for in the discourse of canon. This effectively invalidates some players' engagement with the franchise and the *Star Wars* universe — the limiting imagination of a unified canon deems certain kinds of fictional and gameplay experiences to be *less meaningful* than other experiences.

It bears mentioning that some other digital games have attempted to rehabilitate this problem in novel ways. BioWare, the developers of the first *Knights of the Old Republic* game, have gone on to produce their own space-opera franchise with the popularly- and critically-acclaimed *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007–2012). Unlike the *Star Wars* games discussed here, the player has the option of importing their *Mass Effect* avatar's appearance, character background, relationships, statistics, and choices from game to game, as the narrative unfolds across each iteration. *Mass Effect* executive producer Casey Hudson explains, "We have a rule in our franchise that there is no canon. You as a player decide what your story is" (quoted in Kollar). By the end of *Mass Effect 3* (2012), there may be significant differences in the narrative and fictional world from player to player, ranging from simple differences in avatar appearance and personality to the deaths of several important characters and even the annihilation of entire alien races.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in BioWare's high-fantasy role-playing games *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening* (2010), and *Dragon Age II* (2011), players' actions and the impact of



their choices on the fictional world can be carried over to set the stage for the next game. Although players are required to create a new avatar for *Dragon Age II*, in-game references to the identity and actions of their previous avatar preserve and validate the player's earlier experience. Rather than attempting to create a monolithic, "official" continuity by imposing a single canonical narrative that invalidates all other versions, BioWare has instead endeavored to preserve the multiplicity of individual, internally-coherent continuities that are an inevitable by-product of nonlinear digital gameplay (and, as I argue, indeed of *all* engagement with transmedia franchises).

These are just a handful of examples of the complex relationship between franchise canon and digital games. Cooperative games, multiplayer games,<sup>7</sup> non-narrative games, the LEGO- and Fisher Price-licensed *Star Wars* games aimed at children, non-digital games, toys, and unstructured play offer other challenges.<sup>8</sup> But where does all this leave the study of *Star Wars* digital games, and transmedia franchises more generally, not to mention the actual work of theory? Whether or not the commercial products of a multi-billion dollar industry conform to the selfish desires of privileged *Star Wars* fans and gamers is not a particularly pressing concern. However, the questions raised by digital games, as well as other tensions and cracks in the dominant discourse of canon and continuity, represent a challenge that necessitates and enables a critical rethinking of the field of transmedia and convergence studies.

## Conclusions: Understanding the Canon

Ironically, it is precisely the problematic dominant discourse of canon and continuity that guides and structures many existing scholarly approaches to transmedia franchises. In his often-cited (indeed canonical) work on media convergence and transmedia storytelling, Henry Jenkins insists on the aesthetic and theoretical value of continuity, internalizing rather than interrogating its logic. Jenkins's ideal conception of a franchise is a "unified experience" developed systematically and without redundancies across multiple media platforms, emphasizing coherence and plausibility in fictional universes ("Revenge"). Given this tendency to participate in rather than deconstruct processes of canon maintenance in media studies, the actual complexity of transmedia franchises is frequently ignored and under-theorized. More recently, he has come to acknowledge that multiplicity is important in some franchises (particularly those centered on superheroes), but his understanding of multiplicity is no less problematic. Jenkins asserts that some franchises

use multiplicity — the possibility of alternative versions of the characters or parallel universe versions of the stories — as an alternative set of rewards for our

mastery over the source material. Multiplicity allows fans to take pleasure in alternative retellings, seeing the characters and events from fresh perspectives ... where we embrace a logic of multiplicity, they simply become one version among many which may offer us interesting insights into who these characters are and what motivates their behavior ["Revenge"].

In spite of this attempt to incorporate the idea of multiplicity into his thinking, Jenkins has continued to privilege consistency and clarity over multiplicity and heterogeneity, and he persists in understanding franchises in terms of the supposedly unified fictional universes they create, rather than as complex, diverse systems of discourse and practice. Jenkins conceives multiplicity in hierarchical terms as a set of alternatives to an implied "official" or "original" version ("Revenge"). Note also his emphasis on knowing "who these characters are," suggesting a fixed, transcendent form from which all instances of the character are derived ("Revenge").

Jenkins's version of multiplicity is just as orderly as his version of continuity, but the fact of the matter is that transmedia franchises are not orderly. As cultural and discursive fields, they are messy and incoherent, and it is highly problematic for scholars to map coherence onto franchise discourse in this manner. For all that the entertainment industry attempts to determine the meaning and control the uses of its products, it inevitably fails; as Jonathan Gray argues, "film and television narratives are open for business — or, rather, for play — and have been for many years, whether media firms and their legal teams like it or not" (187). I would suggest that Jenkins and the numerous others who adopt his model paint an incomplete picture of the many phenomena that make up transmedia franchises by taking the privileged status of canon and continuity produced within franchises (as well as their implicit hierarchies of "official" and "unofficial") at face value. It seems to me that this conservative, old-fashioned approach runs counter to Jenkins's general project of elevating and exploring the marginal discourses of fans and other groups in pop culture. Digital games and gameplay, by failing to conform to presumed distinctions between canon, apocrypha and ephemera, clearly demonstrate the limitations of approaches to transmedia franchises centered on storytelling, fictional universes and story worlds, and exemplify the need for a more nuanced theoretical framework. Active engagement, dissensus, negotiation, play and pragmatic appropriation should be seen as the norm, not as an idiosyncratic exception, in all franchise discourse and practice, both "official" and "unofficial."

Altman and other contemporary genre theorists argue that close attention must be paid to the multiplicity and discursiveness of transmedia cultural fields like franchises and genres because any given field is constituted by a host of different discourses and practices, each working to define the imagined

whole. Jason Mittell's theory of television genre describes genres as cultural categories, and "situates genre distinctions and categories as active processes embedded within and constitutive of cultural politics," not something that inheres within texts (ix). Franchises, too, are meaning-making and value-assigning categories that must be understood as being constructed through active cultural processes. Evidently, the "official" discourse of canon and continuity (and its function in the industrial organization of the entertainment industry) is significant, but only if it is contextualized in relation to other discourses and practices.

Digital games highlight what has always been true about transmedia franchises: that by their very nature, they counteract and disrupt canon even while they construct it. It is necessary that scholars acknowledge and account for the ways in which different users of transmedia franchises construct and organize vast, incoherent multiplicities of voices, texts, paratexts, and meanings into seemingly coherent (but tentative and constantly shifting) unities, and for what pragmatic reasons. By conceptualizing transmedia franchises as complex networks of discourse and practice that produce cultural categories, distinctions and value hierarchies, rather than as transcendental, unified fictional universes, and by considering apocryphal, ephemeral, and otherwise marginalized aspects of franchises — such as the supposedly non-canonical experiences that emerge in the process of digital gameplay — I believe they can be more fully, productively and critically engaged. With its millions of voices, the *Star Wars* conglomerate quite loudly, and perhaps even more so in its seeming refusal to be silent, offers a nearly ideal place to begin just such a task.

## NOTES

*Funded in part by a grant from the Canadian Media Research Consortium and the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies.*

1. As Jason Mittell pointed out to me, fan Wikis are particularly useful for studying franchises because they manifest the complex discursive processes of meaning-making that subtend their seemingly coherent and final content by tracking changes over time and preserving "edits" to pages (not to mention debates between contributors).

2. Many of these debates are extensively documented online: see, for example, the "The *Star Wars* Canon: Overview," "The Wong vs. G2K Debate," and "Endor Holocaust."

3. This is in spite of the fact that many fans explicitly engage in the construction of alternative canons.

4. One notable exception is the protagonist of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords* (2005), who is referred to as "heroine" in other canonical sources and is therefore considered canonically female and human ("Canon").

5. A heated debate about the canonicity of homosexual *Star Wars* characters ensued in 2009 after a BioWare forum moderator asserted that the concepts of "gay" and "lesbian" do not exist in the *Star Wars* universe. See John Funk.

6. Although beyond the scope of this paper, interestingly there has been a strong backlash

from some fans against *Mass Effect 3*'s ending, who argue that it betrays this sense of a "personal" story and canon.

7. The BioWare-developed massively-multiplayer online RPG *Star Wars: The Old Republic* raises a wide variety of challenges to the discourse of canon. Some of these challenges are addressed on the Wookieepedia discussion page for the game: "Forum:CT:TOR and Video Game Canon."

8. For an interesting example of the potential impact of informal play with *Star Wars* action figures on the larger franchise, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 115. Will Brooker and Jonathan Gray also discuss the importance of toys and play in relation to franchises.



## CHAPTER 12

# The Hype Man as Racial Stereotype, Parody and Ghost in *Afro Samurai*

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In *Afro Samurai*, Namco Bandai's 2009 much-anticipated video game, Ninja Ninja (voice acted by Samuel L. Jackson) is the character who speaks over — and sometimes for — the title character. In the character synopsis of the game manual, Ninja Ninja is described as “Afro’s herald, hype-man and a real shit-talker” who is “mischievous, highly-strung and dangerously irresponsible” (12). Fittingly then, the game opens with Ninja Ninja upstaging the dramatic action of Afro’s near-death. The suspension of sound in the game’s first cutscene is broken by Ninja Ninja’s off-screen dialogue as he makes a direct appeal to the gamer:

Shit. Looks like this is the end for Afro Samurai. You want to help him out? Be my guest! This has been a long time coming. I’ve done all I can. See me and him, we ain’t friends per se. I’ve just been hanging out, looking for a little action.... Only action [Afro’s] been getting is getting his ass kicked. You think I should be watching his back? Fuck you! I’ve been watching, I’ve seen everything [*Afro Samurai*].

Gamers and reviewers have been divided in their assessments of Jackson’s performance of both characters. Some have read Ninja Ninja, much more than Afro, as an intentional parody of Black masculinity, while others have interpreted him as mainly reinforcing stereotypes. Although gamers play through the story as Afro, Ninja Ninja is everywhere — providing commentary, shadowing, disappearing only to reappear seconds later. The in-game map system materializes Ninja Ninja whenever Afro needs direction. As Gamespot columnist Sophia Tong explains approvingly, Ninja Ninja appears “in the direction you need to head and then vanishes in a puff of brown smoke. If

you call on him often, he'll say things like 'I ain't your GPS, bitch!' or find other delightful ways of expressing himself" (Tong). In addition to Ninja Ninja's heavy use of profanity, the gameplay mechanics further integrate essentialized notions of blackness in the titles of special hack-n-slash moves that the player can perfect and perform, moves like "Pimp Hand" and "Dayam That Really Hurt."

While Tong and some of the gamers who wrote reviews on Gamespot, YouTube, and GameFaqs found the choices of characterization and style to be consistent with the way contemporary exploitation narratives exaggerate racialized performance, other respondents found this mode of representation distasteful and regressive. In their review of the game for their popular video podcast, *The Totally Rad Show*, hosts Alex Albrecht, Jeff Cannata, and Dan Trachtenberg flag Jackson's voice acting for Ninja Ninja, as unnecessarily lewd and distracting. Cannata complains, "The love scene was so derogatory" partly because Ninja Ninja is in the background coaching Afro to "tap that ass" and "go ahead, get some pussy." Indeed, after the sex scene (and death of Afro's love interest), Ninja Ninja chides, "If every woman I stuck my dick in died a few hours later, man, I'd put that shit on my resume. Now would that go under skills or other interests?" At one point during the review of the game, Trachtenberg, in a moment of frustration, blurts out that Ninja Ninja is a "minstrel." The other two hosts laugh nervously but Trachtenberg insists, still fixated on Ninja Ninja's speech and dialogue, "I didn't even know why he was saying those things. None of it made any sense." After praising the hip hop soundtrack as "the best ever in a game," *The Totally Rad Show* hosts quickly dismiss the game as an embarrassing disappointment.

With an acknowledgement that the reception of popular constructions of blackness is typically divisive, this essay takes the limited range of interpretations of Ninja Ninja's role in *Afro Samurai* as provocation for further study. The analyses that follow embrace a ludological commitment to examining gamic elements (game narrative, player control, the mechanics of the fighting system) that make *Afro Samurai* a game distinct from other works. Just as important to reading the video game as a game, however, is the aim to post-structurally and dialectically situate the game's content in the larger context of the numerous media influences and bicultural traditions to which it belongs. Fan and journalist reactions to the game's two central characters, critical theory, and close readings of the game's two final boss battles are used to substantiate alternatives to exploring racialized performance in video games. At the core of this critical excavation are the questions: what are the cultural precedents that game developers draw on to create characters that are different and yet recognizable and marketable. Importantly, is Ninja Ninja a neo-minstrel figure? If so, what is the significance of digitizing minstrelsy via the video game?

## New Media, New Racism?

While the *Afro Samurai* video game is but one of a few narrative games to feature a Black character as the story's central player-controlled character, as a commercial video game, it seems likely that it would reinforce dominant cultural associations of blackness (as morally abject, violent, intellectually incompetent, hypersexual, etc.). Despite substantially outpacing both the film and music industries in terms of growth and sales in the United States, the video game industry is an industry of new media production that has consistently recycled very old sensibilities and conventions about race. As one recent survey of the industry reports, 85 percent of player-controlled characters in narrative games are White, roughly 10 percent are Black, less than 2 percent are Asian; Hispanic and Native American central characters are virtually nonexistent in commercial titles (Williams et al. 826). In narrative games that have not replicated the protocols of exclusion, heroes are usually White men, while minority characters are depicted most consistently as adversaries, villains, or criminals.

Mainstream commercial games like *Far Cry 2* (2008), *Resident Evil 5* (2009), and Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) and its host of inspired clones (*Narc* [2005], *187: Ride or Die* [2005], *50 Cent Bulletproof* [2005]) have shaped substantively the academic, popular, and legislative debates about race, video games, and negative stereotypes. The scholarly consensus about racial diversity and the video game industry has necessarily exposed the ghettocentric fascination with blackness in particular and the reproduction of racial ideology in general.<sup>1</sup> As Anna Everett has persuasively argued, "we are confronted with the resilience and tenacity of ideology and its stranglehold on a particular circuit of cultural meaning" in gaming culture (124).

Even if, as this essay will argue, *Afro Samurai*'s use of parody and "fuck you" rhetorical conventions destabilize as much as confirm dominant cultural associations of blackness, is that enough? Although it is important to not overstate the significance of *Afro Samurai*'s various interpretations and meanings, the game is an example of how popular culture most often compounds and transcends simultaneously racial typification — sometimes to productive end. Compared to its source material, the video game version of the story is distinct for the ways in which it stages the relationship between two Black characters as an invitation to play with the notion of reliable and unreliable bodies of knowledge that pertain implicitly to questions about race and identity. The game's hopeful conceit is that we cannot count on pre-constituted signs (of blackness, of authenticity, of religion, of good or evil, of real or fantasy) for any measure of cultural or collective coherence. The game's design

and key boss battles force players to hack and slash through the story's use of melancholic racial stereotypes. Blackness is coded figuratively as a violent set of chronically duplicated images and floating signifiers and as a necessary psychological crutch in the wider transnational cultural exchange. Ninja Ninja becomes the central figure in a cultural indictment of how hype, parody, and trauma are interconnected and work in contradiction in the digital age.

## Cultural Influences, Transcultural Metanarratives

Ninja Ninja and the game's presentation of stereotype are best understood in the context of three factors: the character's comparison to Afro, the franchise's numerous cultural inspirations, and the source material's tendencies to parody Eastern/Western metanarratives, despite an overt reliance on and appreciation of those popular traditions. Perhaps the best term that suits the character in the context of *Afro Samurai*'s pop-cultural legacy of Black cultural/Asian hybridity is what Robin D. G. Kelly and Vijay Prashad have called "polycultural." In contrast to Orientalism, or even multi-culturalism, polyculturalism envisions complex and less transparent subjectivities. For Prashad, polyculturalism "argues for cultural complexity, and it suggests that our communities of the present are historically formed and that these communities move between the dialectic of cultural presence and antiracism, between a demand for acknowledgement and for an obliteration of hierarchy" (Prashad 53–54; Kelley 5–7).

With an artistic background in drawing outside cultural and national hierarchies, *Afro Samurai*'s story creator, Takashi Okazaki, grew up in Japan as an avid consumer of Black American popular culture, particularly 1970s soul, 1980s R&B, and 1990s hip hop. "*Afro Samurai* is a mixture of everything I love," explains Okazaki (Okazaki). The author and illustrator's fondness for blending Black and Japanese cultures first materialized in 1999 as a *doujinshi* manga, a self-published comic, in the obscure Japanese avant-garde magazine *Nou Nou Hau*. Okazaki's original story is a conventional revenge narrative that transplants his aggrieved Black samurai into a feudal and futuristic Japan engaged in an on-going battle for justice, knowledge, and power. As the story unfolds, two headbands that all samurai warriors seek to possess come to represent this battle, and Afro's father is murdered by a character named "Justice" as a consequence. Although the original manga contains convoluted post-modernist and philosophical themes, Okazaki's story was adapted to resemble less of an obscure art comic and more of an accessible popular international multimedia franchise. The resulting adaptations for U.S. audiences include: a Spike TV television anime series (2007) and made-for-television movie



sequel (2009), a two-volume graphic novel/manga revision of the *doujinshi* translated into English (2008), and an action adventure fighting game on the PlayStation 3 and XBOX 360 (2009).

In Okazaki's *doujinshi* and manga art,<sup>2</sup> Afro is drawn crudely, in a long, lean sketch style, often without much facial detail. Afro blends into the frames of the background panels; the Japanese characters around him are etched in a similar fashion. His comparatively darker skin tone and his enormous asymmetrical hair are the primary markers of his visual difference. On the page, quite often Okazaki draws Afro in silhouette form, stressing only the outline of his form and the hair that stretches to obscure his face. The way Afro is introduced in print, then, crystallizes the emotional inaccessibility and stoicism of popular depictions of samurais while coding him as physically distinct from his adversaries. In adapting the manga into a moving image, the creative team of the anime series added additional cultural cues and drew on additional staples of American popculture traditions to make the character look and move like a Black man, despite his penchant for silence and limited affect. Animators gave Afro a "Jimmy Hendrix looking face" and "freestyle" basketball player agility. "When we were thinking of Afro Samurai's movement style, we had this cool idea that maybe he could run around and move like a basketball player," recalls series co-producer Eric Calderon. "We started downloading a bunch of clips and getting some DVDs of slam-dunk contests. The director [Fuminori] Kizaki really tried to incorporate some of that into Afro Samurai's fighting style" (Calderon).

If Afro was transcoded to look and move in ways that would signal recognizable racial difference and Black cultural authenticity to U.S. audiences, his hair and martial arts expertise place the character in proximity with the explosion of Hong Kong action films in the 1960s and 1970s and that production cycle's influence on Black action films (often called "blaxploitation" films) of the late 1960s and early 1970s. African American U.S. karate champion Jim Kelly and several of his cult-film favorites (namely *Black Belt Jones* [1974], *Three the Hard Way* [1974], *The Tattoo Connection* [1978], and *Black Samurai* [1977]) have long-help popularize the visual trope of the Black male warrior/kung fu specialist. While Kelly helped cement dominant visual associations of the Black martial artist with masculinity, natural hair, and physical deftness, the cinematic predilection for Black/Asian action films has continued in films like Berry Gordy's *The Last Dragon* (1985), *Ghost Dog* (1999) starring Forrest Whitaker as an urban samurai, the blaxploitation tribute film, *Black Dynamite* (2009), and the 2010 remake of the *Karate Kid* featuring a Black youth.

Ninja Ninja's speech and rhetorical style that are created in the anime and continued in the video game manifest the same kind of cultural bricolage or "sampling" that informs Afro's Black action film-inspired visual style. With

Samuel L. Jackson providing the voice-acting for both Afro and Ninja Ninja in the anime and video game adaptations, the most evident cultural influence on Jackson's translation of Ninja Ninja is the kind of explicit rhetoric used by iconic blaxploitation film characters like Superfly, Dolemite, or Shaft (who Jackson played in the 2000 remake). As the top-billing voice talent for the project, not only was Jackson the main attraction in the anime and video game's marketing campaign, but he also maintained an active creative influence over how the two characters would interact. As executive producer, Jackson intentionally sought to turn Ninja Ninja into more than a Greek chorus for the universe precisely because Afro rarely talks. Jackson describes Ninja Ninja as the project's "soul" who is given free reign to comment on the story's events and how they affect Afro (Jackson).

Hip hop music became an apt cultural site around which to situate Ninja Ninja and Afro for at least three reasons. First, the music has been a part of a history of East/West cultural reciprocity and appropriation. While the global circulation and consumption of hip hop has meant that Japanese artists like Okazaki were exposed to hip hop's music and culture, so too have notable Black American hip hop artists integrated Japanese and Chinese culture and Eastern philosophies into their craft from the earliest moments of hip hop's genesis.<sup>3</sup> Second, Okazaki's story became further inseparable from the sound, feel, and aesthetic of hip hop music when popular hip hop pioneer The RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan produced the music for the anime adaptation and influenced the sound direction of the game. In both the anime and game soundtracks, Afro is synonymous with a transcultural rendition of hip hop sound; rap music that samples traditional Japanese instrumentation punctuates the character's every move. Third, other characters in the anime and in the video game symbolize different musical traditions. The music tracks of the anime series and video game amplify the non-verbal contours of generational and artistic grievance as Afro/hip hop witnesses Justice (a White cowboy who is always cued by rock music) killing his biological father (who is personified by soul and funk music). Jackson's performance as Ninja Ninja is not quite Greek chorus or even traditional African American trickster figure. By the time the story is adapted for video game audiences, the character is described in musical performance terms as a "hype-man" — a high-energy crowd-rouser in hip hop stage performances. In a story universe and franchise that is replete with many layers that borrow and mimic while also riffing and disunifying, Ninja Ninja as Afro's hype man operates linguistically in a mode of excess and exaggeration that antagonizes and bemuses diegetic onlookers, spectators and gamers alike. Like Public Enemy's notorious hype man, Flavor Flav, Ninja Ninja is indeed stereotypical, and there are certainly ways in which the televisual and new media adaptations of the character traffic heavily in generic,

stereotypical, representations of Black masculinity. As a hype man, though, Ninja Ninja occupies a subversive position in the story's central conceit of grappling with what is real versus what is illusion. As a transgressive figure, Ninja Ninja is foremost a symbol of the relationship between Black masculinity and what Jean-François Lyotard has described as meta- or grand narratives of meaning. If Ninja Ninja's speech distorts and challenges as a way of hyping up story events, then the character's rhetorical style and dubious behavior cast doubt (for Afro, spectators, and gamers) on concrete knowledge in a way that supports Lyotard's suspicion that grand narratives have lost their credibility in postmodernity (37).

Since the manga and anime were both source material for the video game adaptation, the game narrative combines the manga's evident critique and parody of reliable knowledge with the anime's competing turn to the psychology of trauma as a way to define Afro's relationship to Ninja Ninja and the world around him. The way Ninja Ninja changes from manga to game and from anime to game, then, becomes instructive for understanding why the degree of philosophical contradiction that shows up in the game is nonetheless a productive one.

## From Manga to Postmodern Video Game

The manga as source material for the game introduces the interpretative possibility that Ninja Ninja is a non-literal abstraction. Much darker in tone than either the anime or video game, the manga presents Ninja Ninja as akin to a mocking deity who resists easy classification. As in the other versions of the story, Ninja Ninja follows Afro through the events of the main plot, but in this source material he also functions independently of Afro, fighting and interacting freely with others. After another omniscient character fails to kill Ninja Ninja, it becomes clear that whatever Ninja Ninja represents is indestructible. Exasperated, the dying adversary says to him: "I don't believe it ... are you the collective will of the universe?!" (vol. 2, 141). Ninja Ninja quips, "Man, quit makin' crazy shit up. I am what I am, ya dig?" Comfortably embodying ambiguity, he chides, "Don't act like you know me, bra. I ain't takin' his side or anyone else's. I just do what I want" (138).

The video game adaptation draws on the manga's non-literality positing by making the character something that is both a publicly recognized abstraction and a symbol of personal psychological grief. Only the game narrative pits Afro and Ninja Ninja against each other in combat, externalizing the conflicting images of Black masculinity. Before the doppelganger boss battle begins, a monk yells to Afro, "Discard that which binds you to this world."



Apparently, that which “binds” Afro, has much to do with Ninja Ninja because the action of the game shifts abruptly to a new venue, and Ninja Ninja appears before an ominous sky as a horde of exact of copies himself—chronic reproductions of an already unstable sign. The combat is broken into three segments that loop whenever the gamer/Afro fails to use a very precise set of combination moves. Throughout the contest, Ninja Ninja redoubles frequently, spawning innumerable duplications of himself. At last, once the gamer/Afro uses perfect slices to whittle down the representations of the signifying figures on the screen to just one image, Ninja Ninja makes a cheeky postmodernist speech about the subjective nature of reality. The fight ends with Ninja Ninja throwing a deck of cards at the camera and voluntarily vanishing.

As a part of a YouTube debate about whether or not Ninja Ninja is real, one gamer summarized the character’s construction as “complete and utter ninja mindfuckery.” On gamer/vlogger garth1222’s video walkthroughs of the game, garth1222’s visceral reactions to the Ninja Ninja battle scene are equally instructive. For example, when Ninja starts multiplying and explaining his presence as non-literal projection, garth1222 interjects, “This is freaking epic and this song is epic. I was not expecting any of this. Freaking Ninja Ninja is a part of Afro Samurai’s imagination? So I’m basically killing myself, my imagination. What is going on? This is so so very random. And it’s just so awesome at the same time.” If the game rationalizes the battle as an opportunity for Afro to address that which binds him, gamers like garth1222 mirror the difficulty of letting go of the object that is both familiar and vexing, recognizable but unreliable. To this end, garth1222 screams on camera, “What? No Ninja Ninja, no! I don’t want to kill Ninja Ninja. I hope this is all an illusion or something because I don’t want to have to kill him! Ninja Ninja is the coolest character ever, why would I have to kill him? And why are there so many of him?”

garth1222’s questions draw our attention to how, in using the image of the multiplying signifier, the game stages a battle with the analogy of how popular interpretations of Black masculinity function as a site of simulated chronic repetition in late capitalism. Making the postmodernist critique of the real even more plaintive than in the other versions of the story, the video game version of Ninja Ninja challenges Afro’s understanding of the nature of representation when Ninja Ninja says, “You think because I am imaginary, I’m less of a man than you? When it comes down to it, all of us are imaginary, at least in the eyes of others.” The notion of an authentic subjectivity is destabilized here as Afro is implicated in this meditation on the illusive nature of reality under the current conditions of technological reproduction. Ninja Ninja continues, still reproducing his image, “So let’s not start debating who is or is not real.”



As a neo-minstrel signifier of blackness, Ninja Ninja is an extension of an ideological system that produces controlling images of Black masculinity as racialized caricature. It is significant, though, that Ninja Ninja appears as such in a narrative universe that so self-consciously destabilizes the proliferation of signs in general.<sup>4</sup> As signs of blackness coded alternately as hyperbolic and cool, Ninja Ninja and Afro become a part of the video game's mechanical staging of uncertainty about what is authentic, what is imitation, and what is utter nonsense. Essentializing ideologies of racial difference are invariably implicated in this process.

## From Anime to Psychological Game

In making the transition from manga to moving image, the anime's creative talent made some subtle but important changes to Ninja Ninja at the representational (rather than behavioral) level. Unlike the manga, both the anime and the video game narratives veer toward popular derivatives of psychology to further explain Ninja Ninja's role in story events. Calderon describes the decision as collaborative, recalling:

As we went into story development, I think it was actually a combination of Sam Jackson and Okazaki together who kind of had this light bulb when they said "wow, well, what if Ninja Ninja is not a real character but rather the result of Afro Samurai's trauma. And he creates out of his own imagination a person who could say what Afro Samurai feels." You get the revelation at the end that Ninja Ninja is not real. He is a figment of Afro's imagination [Calderon].

The two sides of one person — Afro and Ninja Ninja — are integrated by the conclusion of the anime series as Afro imagines that Ninja Ninja is killed by a third character. Ever the wily ghost, Ninja Ninja slides between Afro and an exacting sword. Temporal and spatial order is suspended as Afro and a bloodied, "dying" Ninja Ninja have their final moments together. The final exchange between Afro and his shadow is animated in slow motion and the pair separate sanguinely like brothers in a classic buddy film. During this moment in the anime, Jackson's voice acting dramatizes the coming together of the two characters' speech patterns, melding them into a unitary existence and singular sound. On screen Ninja Ninja bleeds into Afro, at first with red blood, and then with green sparks that represent his non-human energy.

Despite the anime producers' decision to turn Ninja Ninja into Afro's psychological hallucination and emotional crutch, other characters in the animated series are fully — if inexplicably — aware of Ninja Ninja's presence. For example, in Episode Five, Justice calls Ninja Ninja Afro's little "imaginary friend" and applauds Afro for outgrowing the need for the projected ghost of

his past. Brother 2, a monk who uses technology to survey, record, and monitor Afro, often captures Ninja Ninja beside Afro. In fact, a bloody image of Ninja Ninja standing behind Afro is the last thing Brother 2 sees in the anime as Afro impales the surveyor. The moment creates a striking visual image: the emptied racial signifier (Afro) standing before the full, and more familiar, racial trope (Ninja Ninja), while the controlling gaze (Brother 2's camera/an imperial gaze) that polices them both is fatally ruptured. The fact that Ninja Ninja is viewable by other characters in the final script demonstrates that such tropes or ways of relating are shared public phenomena and are incapable of being reduced to the realm of the personal. As the constant surveillance of Brother 2's cameras documents, the ghost of blackness is something that belongs to the culture industry at large. Having it both ways in the anime adaptation, making him both public and private, demonstrates that popular constructions of blackness now function at the textual level more plainly attuned to conversations about performativity and constructedness than ever before.

Given that there is such a deconstructivist attitude toward traditional metanarratives, the framing of Afro's experience as traumatic and the subsequent use of psychology to explain character motivations represent a philosophical contradiction of the series. The anime and the game are invested in telling a story about the relationship between racialized otherness and psychological harm right in the middle of a tale that is otherwise dismissive of other forms of knowledge. If everything we know is being challenged, compounded, and ridiculed, what can we make of the story's very modernist retreat to and appropriation of psychology as a significant part of the story?

The video game's translation of both the manga's critique of metanarratives and the anime's reliance on psychology make explicit a connection between postmodernity and trauma. As a figment of Afro's imagination, Ninja Ninja looks similar to Afro, but it is important that he is not an exact copy. Ninja Ninja's billowing 'fro is white, his simple clothes are in dark shades of gray, and his face and skin are ashen, ghostly. In psychoanalytic discourse, ghosts and doubles are often theorized as "uncanny," as "melancholic," or as both. While uncanny doubles are figures of eerie familiarity, in "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud describes melancholia as a reaction to a lost object that falls outside the protocols of normal mourning. As Freud has famously explained, "the melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning—an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale" (245). In regular mourning the world feels empty and hollow; in melancholia, it "is the ego itself" that is emptied.

Ninja Ninja is digitized in the game as a ghostly double who is quite literally Freud's "shadow of the object" (248). Like the emotionally impoverished

melancholic ego, Afro is characterized consistently as being gripped by the totalizing grief that prevents him from laughing, playing, socializing, or expressing himself freely in the many cutscenes and flashbacks that make up the old and new media adaptations of the story. To convey this pronounced deadened affect, his only bits of dialogue are to inquire about the whereabouts of Justice or to tell Ninja Ninja to “shut up.” During their in-game boss battle, Ninja Ninja diagnoses Afro’s improvised ego as such, confirming that he has served as a container for Afro’s displaced emotions. Ninja Ninja enlightens him: “Guilt, remorse, fear, joy, anger, love: all the things I carried for you will be yours again to bear. You ready to accept the burden?”

It is instructive that two Black characters are at the center of this story that is ultimately about the inevitable persistence and burden of artifice and melancholia. Beyond Freud, several theorists, notably Anne Cheng and Paul Gilroy, have extended the concept of melancholia to think about race. As Cheng writes in *The Melancholy of Race*, “Freudian melancholia designates a chain of loss, denial, and incorporation” that “presents a particularly apt paradigm for elucidating the activity and components of racialization” (8, 10). Following Cheng, in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Gilroy surmises that essentialist notions of race function melancholically at the level of nation and empire in ways that always perpetuate racism and oppression. Symbolically, the “burden” of full integration of which Ninja Ninja offers Afro during the boss battle is also a burden of racial representation. Any attempt at presenting an avowed, unified and authentic black subjectivity would be subject to the same measure of postmodern skepticism that other symbols of coherence are met with in the game narrative and original story. This is why, in the same moment that Ninja Ninja surrenders the burden of integration/representation to Afro, the character also stresses that neither presentation is more authentic than the other, both images are apt to serve a relational purpose when publicly consumed.

The game adaptation of *Afro Samurai* demonstrates that the predominance of simulation in contemporary culture as melancholic. Jean Baudrillard argues, “it is this melancholia of systems that today takes the upper hand through the ironically transparent forms that surround us” because “melancholia is the fundamental tonality of functional systems, of current systems of simulation, of programming and information” (162). The same hegemonic and pop-cultural “systems” of simulation (games, television, film, music, comics) that circulate racial caricature as a norm create historical moments that are invariably characterized by loss and the implausibility of ever locating certainty. So here, at the surface-level of this caricatured construction, I see in the game’s melancholic, dystopian future a good deal of hope about the durability and ultimate vacuity of race as a sign. While we do not always think about race and popular narratives in this way, the *Afro Samurai* video



game's thematic focus on race, technology, and mourning can be read as an indictment on systems of knowledge in this regard. Beating the ghost — or at least separating from him — requires precision and concerted effort. *Afro Samurai* posits that it is the very process of signification, the ready proliferation of signs and signifiers (of blackness, of postmodernity) that is itself melancholic. It is the system of racism but also of the popularization of race as a signifier that is traumatic. Ninja Ninja, as emblematic of how blackness as racialized performance circulates in postmodernity, occupies a rather uncanny position in gamic representation. This real and unreal ghost is uncanny in video game history because aspects of his performance (his voice, humor, slang) are no doubt familiar to American viewing audiences, while the competing messages about his role in a larger cultural marketplace is nonetheless indicted purposefully and subversively.

## Justice Is Dead! — And Other Endgame Revelations

In a narrative world that plays with signs, signification, and meaning, it matters that Justice is a dead White cowboy when Afro reaches him at game's end for the final boss battle. After surviving the battle of racial melancholia and simulation with Ninja Ninja, Afro discovers that the grand narrative of some unifying and fulfilling notion of justice is, in fact, dead to him, unavailable for a real or literal avenging showdown. Once again, simulation predominates as Afro stares at the skeleton of Justice and imaginatively resurrects his nemesis in his mind so that he creates only an illusion, a mimesis of a concluding boss battle that again plays out where psychology and simulation meet.<sup>5</sup> In the projected battle, Justice fights cunningly and talks a great deal in death as Afro slices and dices and ultimately dismembers the representation of his foe before a bloodied and barren landscape. This ending is a digital dramatization of Hortense Spillers's claim that the "representational potentialities for African Americans" include a "dual fatherhood" that is "comprised of the African father's *banished* name and body and the captor father's mocking presence" (80). Justice says as much, telling Afro, "You're the son of two fathers; your blood-father and me. Too bad you got your looks from him. He gave you life; I gave you direction." That the representation of White paternity is dead is another way the story plays with replicas of a racial past in order to argue for a separation from melancholic relationships with established historical legacies. The fantasized final battle offers a melancholic restaging of the American history of slavery and oppression by reanimating and dismissing what the transnational and transhistorical game story constructs as an outdated binary of black/white.



Yet, the conjured image/enemy/father that Afro engages in the battle is contextual, specifically suited to address the character's particular grievances, fantasies, fears, and desires. Justice by this point, like *Ninja Ninja* and Afro, is not actual or codifiable. The use of psychology is a means to this end. Any notion of what "justice" means, the logic follows, is ambiguous and open, and thus resists becoming a new meta-narrative of our time. A non-specified notion of justice, like a destabilized signifier such as race, is, perhaps paradoxically, a hopeful place at which to end. As Steven Best and Douglass Kellner explain in thinking through postmodernist conclusions about justice, "justice in each case will be the matter of a provisional judgment which allows no generalization of universal rules or principles" (163). For Lyotard, it is progressive to imagine a "multiplicity of justices" where justice "consists in working at the limits of what the rules permit, in order to invent new moves, perhaps new rules and therefore new games" (100). Afro's "fight" with Justice is only a possibility of what might happen at the end of a wholly symbolic journey. After the simulation with Justice, instead of uniting and wearing the two coveted headbands that symbolize power and unification, Afro disposes of them. The game's story ends with Afro using modernist engagements with melancholia to pose postmodernist interventions that value the possibility of contextual justice and the rejection of totalizing knowledge.

Although gamers did not turn explicitly to psychoanalytic or postmodern discourses to make sense of the many codes and paradoxes of the *Afro Samurai* story, it is nonetheless exciting to discover that popular works about race and identity are being read intertextually and dialectically in ways that extend beyond the overtly banal hack-n-slash mechanics of this particular game genre. As Justice, from deep within the recesses of Afro's mind, challenges, there is still much to do with an adaptive narrative such as this one. Continuing to annihilate the boundaries of game and open discourse, the character breaks the fourth wall as only *Ninja Ninja* has done, lamenting: "But this isn't about you; come on! Your name may be on the box, but inside? You're a novelty, a whim. In ten years, in five, who will remember Afro Samurai? But your story, our story, that's a different matter." Indeed the game's story and character adaptations deliberately make dilemmas surrounding stereotype, parody, and psychology relevant to discussions about race in game studies and new media criticism in ways that intervene in the scholarly precedent for chronic disappointment on these matters.

## NOTES

1. See Brock 429–452; Higgin 3–26; Leonard 49–69.
2. When I use the term "manga," I am referring to the two volume graphic novel released in the U.S, not the original *doujinshi* published in Japanese.

3. There are many examples of this in hip hop perhaps none more applicable to this franchise than The RZA's engagement with Eastern cultures. As The RZA explains in *The Wu-Tang Manual*, "An MC battle is like that to us—a challenge of the sword. We apply that to everything we do—from the sound of it, to the competitive swordplay of the rhyming, to the mental preparations" (64).

4. In all versions of the story, The Empty Seven, a band of assassin monks further reflects a disruptive, destabilizing attitude toward the familiar narratives of religion, nation, and culture. At once, the monks signify machines, human, black, Japanese, Buddhist, Christian, Southern, Eastern, traditional, new age, copies, original. Like Ninja Ninja, they represent some of the perils of cultural hybridity and exploitation, and they demarcate how meaning and characterization in this universe is by nature convoluted and highly undependable.

5. The manga and anime endings differ from the one presented in the game. In the manga, after a nervous breakdown upon discovering that Justice is already dead, Afro reluctantly becomes a god and vows to "keep moving forward" in the final full-page panel (162). In the anime, Justice is only half-dead when Afro fights him and the story ends with Afro being pursued by others out for revenge, with Ninja Ninja and Afro together saying "and so the never-ending battle continues, on and on and on" over an inter-title.

## CHAPTER 13

# Epic Nostalgia: Narrative Play and Transmedia Storytelling in *Disney Epic Mickey*

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*Disney Epic Mickey* (2010) for the Nintendo Wii is marketed as an adventure where you can “unleash the power of the brush in an epic quest to save a forgotten world.” The game’s opening cutscene sends Mickey Mouse through his bedroom mirror into the sorcerer Yen Sid’s workroom.<sup>1</sup> Mickey stumbles upon Yen Sid’s latest magical creation, “A world for things that had been forgotten.” While experimenting with Yen Sid’s magic paint, Mickey accidentally creates the Shadow Blot, a threatening villain, and spills paint thinner in his haste to escape, turning Yen Sid’s new world into the “Wasteland.” While Mickey returns home and enjoys fame in the outer world, the Wasteland residents are terrorized by the Shadow Blot and his assistant, the Mad Doctor. Eventually, though, these villains manage to pull Mickey back into the Wasteland, plotting to steal his heart and use it to travel to the outer world.<sup>2</sup> To return home (the game’s quest goal), Mickey must use paint and thinner to restore the Wasteland and free its population from the Shadow Blot’s control. Along the way, Mickey has to gain the trust of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Mickey’s Wasteland counterpart, and convince Oswald to help destroy the Shadow Blot. When the opening cutscene ends, the player takes control of Mickey to help him find a way home (and, perhaps, repair the Wasteland along the way).

Both nostalgic and self-reflexive, *Disney Epic Mickey* uses transmedia storytelling to build and exploit players’ competencies with film, television, games, and merchandise and to immerse both novice and experienced players

in Disney history. In their introduction to *Playing the Past*, Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen suggest that nostalgia can “be understood in constructive terms, as the process by which knowledge of the past is brought to bear on the present and the future” (3). They also indicate that video games as a medium are dependent on memory (of both player and machine), and they “operate within a rich new media ecology and inform how we think about memory, history, and nostalgia through other types of media” (9). Acknowledging nostalgia as a *process* of applying knowledge, which uses and transforms memory, is key to understanding how large transmedia stories create an investment across media. *Disney Epic Mickey* engages the player by using a world she is familiar with, including characters that she already has a connection to, and uses that knowledge to build a game world with rules that are driven by Disney ideology. Throughout the game, the player participates in nostalgic processes — applying her preconceived knowledge of Disney to the game to develop cohesion and make meaning from the play.<sup>3</sup> The game then includes knowledge of Disney’s past that the player may not be familiar with, thus providing the player with new knowledge about the larger Disney franchise that she can use to make sense of the game world and gameplay. Through transmedia connections to franchise elements like Disneyland and “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” the game fosters, challenges, and remakes the meaning of the spaces and characters that the game assembles.<sup>4</sup>

A close examination of the game world, characters, and method of play illustrates how these three elements create a framework that connects the game to other existing media as it uses nostalgia and player competency to involve both new and experienced audiences in the narrative. Beyond simply linking to the other elements of the Disney universe, *Disney Epic Mickey* offers a model for generating player desire for and investment in a larger franchise. It does this through the processes of nostalgia. By using players’ knowledge of Disney and allowing them to make choices about how they will participate with the different media embedded in the game, *Disney Epic Mickey* highlights the potential of film, TV, and game convergence to create meaningful spatial and temporal stories, where each medium adds complexity to the player’s experience with the franchise and where nostalgia is used to initiate and sustain long-term engagement with a broad, transmedia story.

### Recall: Evoking Nostalgic Spaces and Generating Narrative Engagement

*Disney Epic Mickey* depends on the player’s memory of and nostalgia for Disney cartoons, properties, music, and conventions to make the game world



understandable and enjoyable. Drawing on Andreas Huyssen's observation that "nostalgia is not separate from memory, but rather is a part of it — a form of memory" (quoted in Reading and Harvey 175), Anna Reading and Colin Harvey note "we are able to orchestrate ourselves within the game environment, temporally and spatially, precisely because we remember where we are within the game, or simply because we remember that we are playing a game" (175). The Disneyland-inspired environment of *Disney Epic Mickey* compels players to use their memory of the already-in-progress transmedia story of Mickey Mouse to implicitly set boundaries on the game world and to allow narratives to emerge from their personal experiences navigating those familiar places. Even the game's introduction enacts nostalgic, transmedia connections to ease players' transition into play and evoke narrative. For example, players familiar with *Fantasia* recognize Yen Sid's workshop with its iconic broom and pail and hear a modified theme from "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" in the background. These connections create expectations that the workshop and the game world are spaces of danger, play, power, and folly. By referencing spaces the player already understands (the workshop, theme parks), the game initiates a nostalgic process in which the player recalls and revises the meaning of those spaces. The differences between the player's idealized memories of Disney and the game's representation of Disney allow the player to alter what the characters, narratives, and spaces mean within the larger transmedia narrative.

*Disney Epic Mickey* uses representations of theme park rides to evoke its own narrative and implicitly shape player behavior. By couching the game's quests and challenges in Disney park attractions like the Mad Tea Party, Dumbo the Flying Elephant, and The Haunted Mansion among others, the game provides the context of known spaces for the player's actions and directs her toward goals (fixing the iconic rides so that Mickey can use them to reach high places, etc.). To explain how spaces can be used to evoke narrative and generate behaviors, Henry Jenkins quotes Don Carson, a Disney Senior Show Designer, while noting, "the amusement park attraction doesn't so much reproduce the story of a literary work, such as *The Wind and the Willows*, as it evokes its atmosphere; the original story provides 'a set of rules that will guide the design and project team to a common goal' and that will help give structure to the visitor's experience" (123). *Disney Epic Mickey*'s virtual theme park produces the same effect. The player's affective, nostalgic connection to the collective cultural and personal memories of these attractions motivates in-game actions, but it also connects the space (real and virtual), the player, and Mickey in a larger narrative economy.

Selecting Disneyland as a model for the game world triggers existing nostalgia in players familiar with Disney *and* manufactures nostalgia in players

who understand gameplay but are unfamiliar with the game's transmedia links. The game's dystopic twist on Main Street ("Mean Street"), Adventureland ("Ventureland"), Tomorrowland ("Tomorrow City"), Sleeping Beauty Castle ("Dark Beauty Castle"), Toontown ("OsTown"), and New Orleans Square ("Bog Easy") generates a nostalgic desire for the already knowledgeable player to repair/redeem the game world to match the ideal Disneyland. The player unfamiliar with the spatial connection to Disney, however, is driven by her recall of gameplay conventions to repair the park to collect bonus material and extras. Players are rewarded for acting on or building nostalgic connections; repairing rides (an implicit game goal) leads to bonus material or makes accomplishing explicit game goals easier. Through this bonus material, then, the nostalgic player gets to virtually experience and manipulate Disneyland, while the uninitiated player claims historical knowledge about the attractions and their importance.

The game's design both ensconces the player in a safe familiar world and invites her to (gingerly) question her perspective on that world (and the larger Mickey/Disney universe). The game creates what Jenkins refers to as an evoked narrative, where "spatial design can either enhance our sense of immersion within a familiar world or communicate a fresh perspective on that story through the altering of established details" (129). The game space must be familiar enough to orient the player and limit the available actions, but it must also be darkened just enough to generate interest and give the player impetus to redeem, rebuild, and (re)remember Disney in a way that a perfect spatial representation of Disneyland would not. *Disney Epic Mickey* creates a compelling addition to Mickey's story because the game world is just different enough to convey a haunting feeling of dissonance that fuels gameplay. The player is interested in the game world because it does not exactly simulate the real experience of Disney. The gap between the real experience and the game's representation makes the player want to explore where and why those differences exist and how they trigger gameplay.

To this end, the game uses the player's prior knowledge of the spaces to evoke micro-narratives. For example, Mean Street draws on the player's knowledge of Disney's Main Street, U.S.A. as an innocuous hub — a staging area where most of the action will be completing "retrieve-lost-object" quests for various characters without significant combat. Mean Street is a place for greeting other characters and obtaining information about the game world, much like Main Street is a comfortable (non-attraction or thrill-oriented) entryway into Disneyland. By contrast, the player expects Ventureland to have the excitement and danger of Adventureland and to draw on specific park attractions. The game uses the player's expectations of these known spaces to give context and purpose to the narratives players generate.

The layout of the game locations makes nostalgia a necessary and inevitable process. Gameplay requires the player to revisit Mean Street as the central gateway to other areas. This continual return to the hub forces the player to recall past knowledge of the space to make sense of what has changed. The player is constantly revisiting and revising the meaning of this central space: "Games and electronic literature ... thus come to stand for a nostalgic desire to return, a desire reinforced by the very structure of games" (Taylor and Whalen 8–9). Game events change the way the player interprets earlier zones and the action of returning to those zones, and reworking those spaces produces nostalgia as players recreate the stories of those zones.<sup>5</sup> In his article "Epic Spatialities," William H. Huber discusses the layering of spatial experiences like those in *Disney Epic Mickey*: "Players return to a known world — a world that is much like that which they remember, as an experienced (material) space. The fictional historical change in these materially unchanged spaces produces experiences such as nostalgia, mourning, and expectation, through a fictive collective memory, abetted by the player" (382). *Disney Epic Mickey* not only uses the player's nostalgic feelings for Disney as a real space, but it uses nostalgia to control players' in-game behavior, drive narrative engagement, and structure gameplay.

### Rerun: Building Character Competency and Framing Player Choice

The most obvious intention of a transmedia and nostalgic game like *Disney Epic Mickey* is to generate interest in characters (or worlds) that can cross media and link to other commodities. *Disney Epic Mickey* encourages players who have affective, nostalgic connections to Mickey to transfer those affections onto other characters — characters no longer referenced in the Disney canon. This movement from familiar to unfamiliar is similar to the positioning of the Wasteland space as a dystopic space that must be reclaimed through gameplay. The initial opposition between Mickey (who has a heart, is popular, and yet has caused all the trouble that ruined the Wasteland) and Oswald (who has lost his heart, was overshadowed by Mickey, and is constantly trying to remake the Wasteland into Oswald's Disneyland) sets up a narrative of reclamation. Oswald must come to respect Mickey, Mickey must own up to his contamination of the Wasteland, and the characters must come to a sense of togetherness and community. The player builds her competency with Oswald as a character from Disney's history by playing Mickey. As Oswald is revealed to Mickey, he is revealed to the player and the game develops the player's desire to experience more of Oswald in other media. *Disney Epic Mickey*



harnesses the player's existing narrative competencies (knowledge of space, characters, and media conventions) to build a loosely-interconnected, inter-textual, and deeply-layered story of Mickey and Disney that spans more than one medium.

The player's familiarity with Mickey increases her desire to play, while it adds to her competency with Mickey as a character and broadens her possible associations with the franchise. The game's slightly off-model Mickey engages the player's need to redeem her beloved character from the ambiguity (and danger) of his imperfect representation.<sup>6</sup> Representing Mickey with a darker, ink dripping image allows for his redemption in the form of returning to his innocent, iconic self at the game's end — hopefully transferring some of the interesting conflict and meaning from the game narrative back to other Mickey media.

*Disney Epic Mickey* tries to reintroduce and reinterpret Mickey by making explicit transmedia connections to the mischievous Mickey of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." While not directly reprising the role of Mickey from "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," the game uses Mickey's past characterization and symbolic representation to revise what the player considers possible from a character like Mickey. Both Mickeys usurp Yen Sid's power and are unable to control their creations (marching broom or Shadow Blot), causing dangerous disasters. While "epic" Mickey steals Yen Sid's magic paintbrush rather than his iconic sorcerer hat, the game tries to reboot Mickey as a character with some of the apprentice Mickey's dark edge — an edge that seems to be polished away in Mickey's current happy-go-lucky television persona. The character from "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" is unapologetically creating a minion of his own and dreams of having world altering powers to control. In a parallel maneuver, the game's Mickey not only tries to paint a portrait of himself (which transforms into the shapeless, out-of-control Shadow Blot), but he also exerts world altering powers, restoring or destroying according to the player's preferences. While the game makes it clear that Mickey does not intend to cause trouble, it nostalgically reconnects him to a past self that had more room for playful mischief.

The player's recognition of the game's connection to "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" can increase her understanding of the game's implicit narrative and ideological purpose. Mickey's control over paint and thinner recalls the subtle shift between color and black-and-white moments in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." In the film, high tension and high action elements were rendered in vivid color, but the calm moment where Mickey believes he has destroyed the rogue broom is in black-and-white, which heightens the tension when the broom regenerates and Mickey loses control. Once Yen Sid returns to save Mickey from a whirlpool and an army of bucket-wielding brooms, the color



is toned down with a darker and subdued backdrop behind the sorcerer's glowing outline (representing his control over the world around him, unlike Mickey's vacillation from violent color to black-and-white and back again). The game recalls this playful coloring by allowing "epic" Mickey to alter the colors of the world around him. When an area has too much color (is too cartoony), the player knows that Mickey should thin out the color. When an area has only a haunting outline and no color, the player knows that Mickey needs to repaint to restore the game world to its natural balance. The player's familiarity with Mickey's failed attempt at controlling Yen Sid's power in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" helps establish the narrative premise of the video game and reminds her of lost, mischievous elements of Mickey's character. The game uses the player's competence with Mickey to shape gameplay, guiding the emergent narrative the player is creating in the game world and fueling the transmedia connections the game asks the player to make.

Mickey is not the only character whose transmedia meaning is enriched and recalled. The forgotten characters of the Wasteland are renewed through new animated cutscenes.<sup>7</sup> Mickey's gremlin sidekick and guide, Gus, tells him that the Wasteland is populated by "characters the world stopped watching and stopped loving. Rough drafts, extras, anyone who didn't work out right. Characters left on the drawing board." The game subtly shifts some blame for the characters' plight to the player, a person who has not loved the Wasteland characters. These moments manufacture nostalgia for those missing characters and take the player to task for not being thorough in her participation in the transmedia story of Disney. The game's premise of Mickey nostalgically re-discovering his history forces the player to do the same. The more obscure in-game characters, such as Horace Horsecollar, make specific transmedia references to their credentials: "Mickey! Do you remember me? Horace Horsecollar! I was in 'The Fire Fighters!,' 'The Barnyard Broadcast!,' 'The Band Concert' — that one was famous!" The game even integrates other media by including stills from characters' cartoon title screens as framed pictures on the walls of houses and offices. The spoken and visual references to real, external Disney cartoons are seamlessly folded into the narrative and are meant to pique the player's curiosity about the larger franchise.

The game's narrative and character development mirror the result the game wants to elicit from players. The narrative strengthens each ancillary character's relationship with Mickey in the game and, by connecting strong characters to weak ones, endears the peripheral characters to the player. The ancillary characters get one or more new cartoons created about them within the game and then these cartoons become collectable movies that the player can watch. These collectibles function to renew old cartoons and forgotten characters, while they add new cartoons to the Disney transmedia economy.

These animated connections work to shift the player's focus from Mickey to a broader family of Disney characters. Connecting Mickey to other characters further builds the player's competency with Mickey, enriching him with a past the player may not be familiar with. The player can then use that knowledge to understand Mickey's character within the game narrative and in other Disney media.

Beyond building competency with forgotten characters, the game's narrative institutes a morality system which allows the player to change the outcome of the overall narrative and forces the player to reflect on her choices throughout the game. In the end sequence, Yen Sid reflects on Mickey's actions: "Thanks to my apprentice [The Wasteland] had developed some magic of its own — magic born of courage and wise choices." The player's in-game behavior and choices (restorative, destructive, or mixed) alter the images Yen Sid displays during the end sequence, while the images connect the player's behavior and choices to a moral system. The endings fall into three main categories: heartwarming, heartbreaking, and the ambivalent. Players who chose to use paint during the game and befriend rather than destroy enemies find they have restored the Wasteland to a happy community. Players who used thinner for most of the game end up with a chaotic, destructive, and un-repaired Wasteland. Players who chose a mix of actions get a mixed result in the end sequence, which juxtaposes their moments of failure and moments of success. The game uses the player's competency with real world and video game moral alignment systems (good-neutral-evil) to help her make meaning from her in-game actions.

This division of the game into relatively fixed moral categories provides benefits for players who, driven by a nostalgic desire to restore Disney, choose to conquer the game with paint. Those players who choose thinner are denied access to extras like collectable pins and other unlockables. Players on the thinner path are often warned that their behavior is not appreciated and non-player characters treat them differently (refuse them discounts, help, or rewards). Although some of the boss battles require more skill and timing with paint, players who choose the paint path often find that harder elements of gameplay are bypassed (e.g., kindly freeing trapped characters opens a simplified path to the goal or skips a mini-boss fight). Often, following the paint path means exploring the entire area, while following the thinner path requires confrontation and destroying the enemies around you. Thus, *Disney Epic Mickey* offers commentary on which path is better; when the player is asked to reflect on her actions at the end, she is rewarded for supporting the game's obvious ideological preference for the selfless-hero ending.

The complexities that the game introduces to create narrative desire and spur player action are softened by the game's moral positioning. Disney has

often been critiqued for this impulse: “Karen Klugman describes Disneyfication as ‘the application of simplified aesthetic, intellectual or moral standards to a thing that has the potential for more complex or thought-provoking expression’” (Shortsleeve 2). The clear preference for the heroic morality choice created by the reward/punishment system flattens the critique of Disney history raised by the dark elements of the landscape, ink-dripping Mickey, and the world of lost/unloved characters. While the darkness of *Disney Epic Mickey* exists to broaden Mickey’s narrative possibilities, the overall game narrative works against allowing ambiguities in Mickey’s character (despite the player’s freedom to choose her path). The major task of the game is restoration: restoring the world that Mickey tarnished, restoring a lost connection to classic cartoons and characters, and restoring the Disney landscape to its pristine (past) existence. Often player choices are not pivotal, and no matter how much time the player spends restoring (or destroying) each zone of the game, the next time she visits that zone it resets to its original state. Thus, the player has a frustrating sense that her choice of restoration or destruction rarely affects the narrative.

The end sequence, however, challenges the idea that the game disregards player choices and simplifies — “Disneyfies” — its story. By reviewing each battle’s effect on the Wasteland community, the game offers multiple dynamic endings, responding to some player input. And while the player’s choices do not change whether Mickey makes it home or the outcome of Oswald and Mickey’s relationship, the 45-second review of the specific player’s choices forces her to confront the ambiguity of her actions — what character did she fail to complete tasks for, what enemies did she battle, how did those choices affect the community of characters? Yen Sid even commands the player to philosophically review her actions: “The funny thing about mirrors; our reflections prompt us to reflect [dramatic pause] on the struggles we have faced or avoided, on how well we managed time, enemies defeated or redeemed, the ways in which we treat others, and perhaps most of all, the friendships we have nurtured or neglected.” And, perhaps, this moment opens up the “potential for more complex or thought-provoking expression” that Klugman and Shortsleeve suggest that Disney typically forecloses.

Overall, *Disney Epic Mickey* uses the player’s nostalgia for familiar characters and spaces to reintroduce an era of forgotten characters. It orchestrates how the player should feel about these characters by using the player’s mastery of the characters’ history and the game’s morality conventions to suggest that restoring these characters to memory is the morally right action. But, by showing the player’s actual actions in the end sequence, the game also presents the player’s choices and the narrative her actions have created nostalgically, continuing the cycle of revision and softening the game’s attempt to (re)build a transmedia Disney with a single moral narrative.



## Replay: Emergent Competency though Remediation

*Disney Epic Mickey* draws on the player's pre-existing competency with Disney elements, both remediating existing stories and referencing shared traditions (Jenkins 123).<sup>8</sup> The game acts as a convenient entry point into transmedia knowledge of Mickey/Disney by calling upon the player's existing narrative competencies and nostalgic desires *and* by building new competencies while remediating historical Disney texts. It does this in part through genre/media specific conventions and the use of 2D transition worlds (which remediate classic cartoons). All of these elements help the player traverse and develop an interest in Mickey's transmedia narrative.

The player's familiarity with cartoon and video game conventions help her navigate the game world and provides context for available actions. Tongue-in-cheek self parody of conventions also invites the player to consciously think about the medium in question. For example, Gus and Oswald have the following exchange when discussing the Mad Doctor's evil plot:

GUS: "When he stole the parts, did he say 'Nyah-hah-hah!'?"

OSWALD: "Yeah ... he did.... Why?"

GUS: "'Nyah-hah-hah' always means bad news."

In this self-reflexive moment the cartoon characters in the game are parodying a cartoon convention. The parody upholds how the player should feel about the Mad Doctor's behavior (he's obviously evil), but it also suggests "Nyah-hah-hah" creates a false division of characters who exist in a world of many gradations of moral choice. Gus, Oswald, and Mickey all accept the premise that "Nyah-hah-hah" equals a negatively defined action and, yet, the cutscene creates tension — ambiguity — over the meaning of "Nyah-hah-hah." As the other characters are shown reacting to Gus's question with puzzlement/surprise, the visual elements contrast with the dialogue. These moments of satire and ambiguity in the game invite the player to question the value and meaning of cartoon tropes as a categorization of knowledge. They present a subtle challenge to simplistic morality and Disneyfication.

*Disney Epic Mickey* also uses conventions and tropes to help the player move through the game. One of the game's most unique elements is how it remediates film in a way that is integral both to gameplay and to the player's narrative experience. For example, it uses film projectors to create an unexpected spatial division of the game world. It departs from current game conventions by constructing the way the player passes from quest zones to action zones and back specifically to highlight its nostalgic purpose. To move between the zones of play, Mickey must pass through a projector screen and into a 2D spatial representation of a classic cartoon. Each transition zone punctuates



the temporal progression of the game with a regression into the past. The player must travel through Disney's past to be allowed to progress to the game's future. Since these transition zones are side-scrolling or vertical-scrolling 2D areas, they also evoke nostalgic memories of older games.<sup>9</sup> The controls are simplified in these zones, once again depending on the player's nostalgic connection to gaming history to make sense of the sudden lack of the Wii's motion controls and Mickey's paint power. Mickey's only available actions in these transition zones are walking and jumping. The player must switch mindsets and think about how to traverse the filmstrip.

These transition zones highlight both the remediation of the film clips (now playable spaces) and Disney's investment in film as a medium. They are black and white and each one represents the *mise-en-scène* of one of the benchmark Disney shorts from 1920 to 1950, reinforcing the player's understanding of Mickey's historical lineage and vintage characters missing from our cultural consciousness. The transition zones symbolically show the importance of film to Disney's history and allow the player to enact that history. The player generates new narratives by existing in the space of the films rather than following the plot/action of the films verbatim. The films are still recognizable enough that they produce a nostalgic reaction on the part of the player who is familiar with *Steamboat Willie* (1929) or the haunted house and playful ghosts from *Lonesome Ghosts* (1937). The player's knowledge of these short films gives the strange transition zones some continuity and purpose; they make the switch to black and white and 2D unremarkable. The idea of passing into the projection screen also makes that transition easier for the player; by passing into film, the player is released from holding the game to the conventions of the 3D. In his commentary on game spaces, Huber states, "inverting the customary relationship between time and space, it is the passage through geographic space that creates the tempo for the passage of fictional/historical time" (Huber 380). *Disney Epic Mickey* not only uses passage through space to trigger the progression of game time, it also suggests that replaying history is a way to move forward.

*Disney Epic Mickey's* efforts to frame itself as a gateway to understanding Mickey as a transmedia phenomenon and its careful development of Disney history within the game, also smooth over the tumultuous past surrounding Oswald and Mickey. *Disney Epic Mickey* makes the Oswald shorts seem as if they just faded away because of Mickey's popularity. It even has Oswald acknowledge Mickey's superiority. Mickey convinces Oswald not to give up without a fight and Oswald responds: "But — could we really — Sure! Gimme the parts! Then meet me at the Rocket in Tomorrow City! And Mickey... Now I really DO see why he [Walt Disney] liked you." One of Oswald's changes to the Wasteland was to build a statue of himself hand-in-hand with

Walt Disney to replace the statue of Mickey and Walt in Disneyland. The game visually presents Mickey's elation at seeing the familiar statue and then his disappointment at seeing Oswald in his place. But Oswald's revelation above shows him acknowledging Mickey's worth and fame. The game elides the messy parts of Disney history where Oswald changes from a Disney product to a Universal product, and it further suggests that Disney's relationship with Oswald was untroubled.

In contract negotiations, Disney refused to work for film distributor Charles Mintz and, therefore, lost control of Oswald: "Disney was outraged at what he considered an act of flagrant betrayal.... Without hesitation he abandoned his connections with Mintz, Universal, and Oswald the Rabbit" (Merritt and Kaufman 99). *Disney Epic Mickey*, despite its investment in Disney history, glosses over Oswald's years as the product of another company. In doing so, and in allowing the game narrative to implicitly acknowledge Mickey's superiority, the game sells short the influence Oswald played in Mickey's development. The final words of the game are Yen Sid's: "I hope they [Mickey and Oswald] become friends, and perhaps more. Perhaps even brothers." *Disney Epic Mickey* is willing to equate the two characters, but it leaves their relationship to the future ("I hope"). This choice of phrasing makes light of how much Mickey's historical development depended on the Oswald shorts: "But if Oswald's short life with Disney had accomplished nothing else, it would still be notable for having helped to launch the greatest cartoon character of them all" (Merritt and Kaufman 99). The game's obvious reverence for Walt Disney and the way Mickey and Oswald are placed in a hierarchy participate in a nostalgic revision/sanitization of Disney's past. While small elements of *Disney Epic Mickey* present ambiguity and promote complex relationships (all in support of a transmedia understanding of Mickey/Disney), the game's morality structure and hierarchies enact a nostalgic desire for an idealized Disney and its golden age of development.

## Conclusions

The ties between theme park, television, film, and game that *Disney Epic Mickey* presents are complex, ambiguous, and, certainly, commercially driven. The game exemplifies many types of media convergence: drawing on genre and media conventions; embedding other media inside itself; praising and parodying game, film, and television through narrative and gameplay; and referencing relationships outside the game itself to support meaning and context. Moreover, it transforms film, television, and theme park productions into playable spaces that evoke narratives that depend on players' experience

of those spaces. In using space in this way, *Disney Epic Mickey* strives to connect the player to a transmedia network of texts that all have a stake in what Mickey and Disney mean. It is no surprise that the game is invested in this kind of media work, for Disney has been cultivating media convergence and narrative relationships for most of its history.

Indeed, as Michael Real notes, the park was “designed as a total environment made of dramatic productions complete with plot, scenery, and characters. The visitor passes through a Disney experience just as a viewer is carried through scenes in a film by a camera” (47). And, J. P. Telotte, drawing on Real’s remarks, aptly concludes, “the genre contexts — of park, film, and television — would have a natural continuity, even a kind of *narrative similarity*, and would, like today’s Disney theme parks, play off their links to the film world” (12). Here, Telotte’s notion of “narrative similarity” resonates nicely with Jenkins’s notion of “narrative economy” and draws attention to the importance of narrative competencies a viewer/spectator/player experiences with the text.

By engaging, building, and generating the player’s competencies, *Disney Epic Mickey* effectively brings Mickey into a genre where he has had limited success, and it positions the game as a gateway for its audience to appreciate the character and the brand as viable cultural currency. It also makes manifest Jenkins’s speculation that games (as a media) will become part of a rich media landscape where

the richest understanding of the story world com[es] to those who follow the narrative across the various channels. In such a system, what games do best will almost certainly center around their ability to give concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the storyworld, creating an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with [124].

*Disney Epic Mickey* incorporates a bit of film and television to spark the player’s desire to enrich her understanding of Mickey/Disney. The game’s world, characters, and gameplay allow for a spatialized, emergent story that the player can participate with; it asks the player to think about and playfully experience her relationship to medium, memory, and history. The game reaches out to people who are masters of Disney but not necessarily experienced players (and vice-versa) to both (re)envision the ambiguities of Mickey’s character and to bring a new generation into contact with unfamiliar characters. As part of this process, the game uses nostalgia to draw the player in, while simultaneously obscuring some of the complex meanings that the player might generate from the connection of the game’s Mickey to film, television, and theme park Mickeys. Through the nostalgic play that Disney invites in *Disney Epic Mickey*, we can see how film, television, and game convergence

produce meaningful, if a bit chaotic, spatial-temporal stories, where each medium enhances the player's relationship to "epic" Disney.

### NOTES

1. Yen Sid is the sorcerer from the "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" in the original *Fantasia* (1940).

2. In the game, characters "lose their hearts" and go live in the Wasteland when they are no longer remembered by audiences. Their obscurity keeps them from participating in the outer world.

3. *Disney Epic Mickey* is rated "E for everyone" and is likely to have players who have not been to Disneyland or are less familiar with the game world. These players would lack some of the nostalgic drive to play in the space, but they are still drawn into the game's manufactured nostalgia for the classic Disney cartoons. In other words, players unmarked by previous knowledge of Disney are not affected by nostalgia coming in (as a driving element of desire); they are asked to develop a sense of nostalgia for a past the game manufactures through extras and cross-media connections.

4. Although the game includes art inspired by many of the U.S. Disney theme parks, and it draws on locations common to many of the parks, the elements such as New Orleans Square and the Sleeping Beauty Castle indicate that the game's locations are primarily based on Disneyland, CA.

5. This reworking is enhanced by the possibility of multiple play-throughs of the game.

6. Mickey is off-model and dripping ink because he absorbed some of the Shadow Blot. The dripping ink is a constant reminder of his past transgressions and his moral ambiguity.

7. These cutscenes become new cartoons starring retired characters that can now re-enter the Disney archive.

8. Elements remediating existing stories include: retelling classic Disney cartoons within cutscenes, retelling the Peter Pan/Hook battle using the character Pete, referencing Tron by having Pete appear as Petetronic, and positioning Oswald's love interest, Ortensia, as Sleeping Beauty. Elements referencing shared traditions include the Haunted Mansion's stretching room, gameplay conventions, cartoon conventions, and spatial references such as Main Street, U.S.A.

9. This is especially true since *Disney Epic Mickey* was only released for the Nintendo Wii, a console that is heavily invested in nostalgic representation (emulation) of 8-bit, side-scrolling games from its past. See Taylor and Whalen's *Playing the Past*.



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**T**he 14 essays in *Game on, Hollywood!* take on several points of game and film intersection. They look at storylines, aesthetics, mechanics, and production. The book is about adaptation (video game to film, film to video game), but it is even more about narrative. The essays draw attention to the ways and possibilities of telling a story. They consider differences and similarities across modes of storytelling (showing, telling, interacting), explore the consequences of time, place and ideology, and propose critical approaches to the vastness of narrative in the age of multimedia storytelling.

The video games and film texts discussed include *The Warriors* (1979 film; 2005 video game), *GoldenEye* (1995 film), *GoldenEye 007* (1997 and 2010 video games), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2000–2004, television show), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* (2003 video game), *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003 video game; 2010 film), the *Star Wars* franchise empire (1977 on), *Afro Samurai* (2009 video game), and Disney's *Epic Mickey* (2010 video game).

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Front cover: Mary Elizabeth Winstead as Ramona Flowers in *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* (Universal/Photofest); background (Hemera/Thinkstock)



**McFarland**

ISBN 978-0-7864-7114-0



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